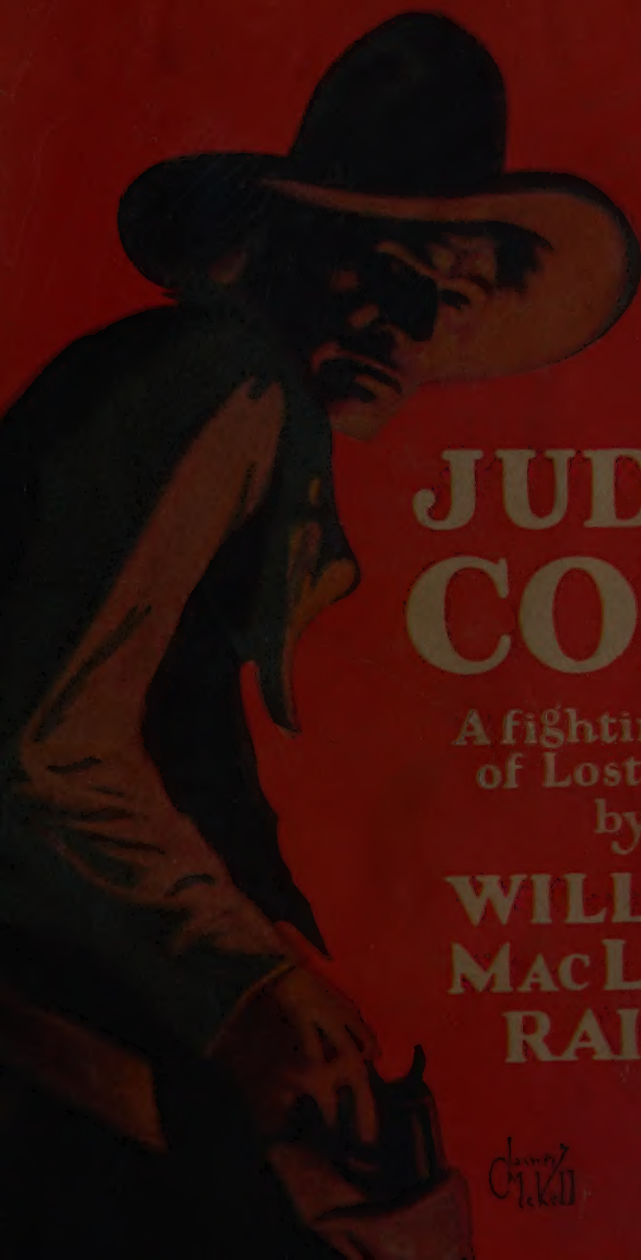


*of equity came from the holster."*



# JUDGE COLT

A fighting epic  
of Lost Park

by

WILLIAM  
MACLEOD  
RAINE

Clancy  
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## JUDGE COLT

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of

Bonanza,

Roads of Doubt, Etc.

"The first decision of a frontier court comes from the holster—and is irrevocable." That was the unwritten law of the Old West—and Jim Turner had occasion to bank on it.

A light-hearted expedition to discover the unknown "Lost Park," home of outlaws, ends in the cowardly murder of Jim's pal. Jim vows vengeance on the killer and trails him to Lost Park. Here he runs into a tangled maze of mysterious circumstances, and has to fight his way out. He fights not only for himself and for the inheritance whose secret is buried in Lost Park, but chiefly for lovely little Pattie Hughes whose father was accused of being an outlaw.

The time came when Jim had to "shoot it out" with his enemies, and "Judge Colt" held the words that meant death or happiness to the lovers in his great, steel throat.

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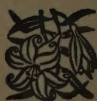


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*"The first decision of a frontier court of equity  
came from the holster."*

BY  
WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

AUTHOR OF  
A MAN FOUR-SQUARE,  
THE BIG-TOWN ROUND-UP,  
GUNSIGHT PASS, ETC.



GROSSET & DUNLAP  
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

HUDSON COLT

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINES

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE  
COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

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JUDGE COLT



# JUDGE COLT

## CHAPTER I

### A HORSE TRADE

AT THE crest of the divide, after a long climb, the foremost rider turned in the saddle, let out a gay "Hi-yi," and shouted derisive encouragement to his companion.

"Come on, you Hal boy. Give that burro you're a-straddle the spur an' likely he'll make the grade. We ain't got but a million more hills to climb till we get to the top of the world. Keep pushin' on yore reins, son."

"I'm on my way," the other called back. "A cat couldn't hardly make this shale cliff, let alone an honest-to-God cow pony."

"Hmp! That what you call yore broomtail? Four Bits, he done it an' never turned a hair. O' course, I ain't comparin' that bag of bones you're on . . ."

Hal Shoreham put his horse at the last steep rise and his pony clambered up like a goat, the shoulder muscles standing out like ropes as the animal took the pitch.

The two horses stood panting side by side, their glistening bodies heaving beneath the cinches.

"One hell of a lot of scenery up here," Hal commented, after one look around upon a tossing sea of ravines, forests, and hilltops stretching to the far horizon of jagged peaks.

"Yep, I could get along with some less, me, too," agreed Jim Turner. "Sure looks like the whole darned country is standin' on end. How in Mexico is a fellow to know this doggoned Lost Park when he meets up with it?"

"I don't reckon it's got a brand on it. Like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, as the old sayin' is."

"Well, we gotta keep going. The boys would josh us to death if we don't find it after all our brags."

"I expect they would ride us considerable," Hal agreed, his brown boyish face crinkling to a grin. "They're liable to get the chance, too, I shouldn't wonder. But we got a week to look around. If we're lucky, we'll find the park."

They were both boys in years, neither of them quite twenty. In many ways, their outlook on life was young, as it is likely to be with riders of the range. They live simple lives, in the outdoors, far from great centres of population. Inside their hard, tough rind, they are quite often naïve and boyish. They lark around, play practical jokes on each other, and are easily exalted to high spirits. Yet these two lads were men in the conditions of the existence they led. They faced the dust and drought of summer, the blizzards of winter, long hours, and hard riding cheerfully and gaily. They knew how to endure pain without flinching.

Now they were far up in the high lands, for they had been travelling since dawn of the previous day. In adventurous mood, they had set out on a quest for that Lost Park which in their district had become so linked to mystery that it was a symbol, one held by some to be mythical rather than real. Few knew where it lay, and of those few none cared to tell. Rumour had it that the park was a refuge for those who found it necessary to vanish from sight because of the more or less long arm of the law. Horse thieves and murderers infested it, so the story ran, ruffians who dared not show their faces

in civilized communities except unexpectedly and for short periods.

The young riders of the Bar X Y had talked of it often. Men reported that the Henry gang made it their headquarters, and more than one of the ranch boys had seen Hughes Henry and Black Tom Truesdale at Saponera and had watched them ruffling it in the gaming houses there, a trifle awed while these notorious desperadoes held the stage. The subject of Lost Park was a standard one for conversation, just as was the hydrophobia skunk. It could not be exhausted, because nobody knew anything about it, and one theory was as valid as another. In one of these arguments young Turner and his friend Shoreham, who had been dubbed David and Jonathan because of their close alliance, had been driven into a bet that they could find the place. At first, the whole thing had been a joke, but the other punchers had ridden them so hard that their bluff had crystallized into serious intention. Since it was an off season at the ranch, they had easily obtained a ten-day leave of absence.

For two days they had been climbing. Narrow gorges, great clefts in the hills that seemed to have been made by titanic sword cuts during the plastic childhood of the earth, opened rifts up and down which they plodded in a leisurely way. There was no hurry. They were enjoying themselves and the experience. In the streams were trout and in the hills game waiting for their rifles. What more could one ask of an outing? If they found Lost Park, good; if not, well, it couldn't be helped.

The sky above them was a cerulean blue, clear except when mackerel clouds drifted across and stretched out as though unseen hands pulled at them. When they looked up through the pines the sky took on a richer, darker hue.

At sunset they camped again, in a small grassy valley

through which a narrow mountain stream wound. While his friend made camp, Jim cut a willow shoot for a rod, put a fly on a leader, and tried his luck. The trout were jumping and he landed half a dozen half-pounders. He cleaned them and returned to camp. Soon they were sputtering in a frying pan beside a slice or two of bacon.

They ate supper as darkness began to fall, heartily, with all the keen hunger of youth. Neither of them had as yet any premonition of the disaster shadowing their lives. They talked cheerfully and laughed lightly at small reminiscences of the bunkhouse at the ranch. When they had cleaned up the supper things, they got out an old greasy pack of cards and played seven up.

Presently Jim yawned. "My blankets for me, I reckon," he said.

They walked down to the spot where their horses were picketed to make sure that all was well, then returned to the camp fire and shook out their blankets. Night had closed in on them, with the strange weird effect it often has in the Rockies. Both of them had camped out many times and neither was disturbed by the mournful sough of the wind through the pine tops. The stars were out by thousands, emphasizing their aloneness in a world of shadowy peaks. A sliver of a wafer moon rode the heavens.

In their warm blankets, they still talked a little before dropping off to sleep.

"If we have any luck, we'll have the laugh on the boys," Hal said. "It's all luck—'most everything is. You gamble, an' the cards fall yore way or they don't. *Quien sabe?*"

"I'm not so sure it's all luck," Jim protested. "Take old Dud Holway. Put him in a poker game an' he most generally comes out winner—plays his hand close an' knows when to bluff an' when to crawl into his shell. I've figured it's



that way in this business of gettin' along in the world. One guy says, 'Nothin' to it but luck,' an' he shoots his wad at faro or at the saloon; another guy plays close, sizes up opportunities, knows when to plunge an' when not to. Consequence is, he gets rich an' the first bird rides the range for him. It was that way with the old man, wasn't it? He didn't bring a dollar Mex to Saponera when he drifted in, but now he's got it an' the lads he usta ride herd with are lookin' for jobs, maybe. No, sir, he didn't get the Bar X Y by luck."

Hal yawned luxuriously. "Boy, you'll have to show me. He married V. Painter's daughter, didn't he?"

"Yep, but he was already started with a good ranch before that. No, sir, half the time a fellow makes his own luck."

It must have been in the small hours that Hal awoke suddenly and sat bolt upright. He was shivering. The wind whined in the pines. The stars had gone. Hal listened, oddly frightened at something, he knew not what.

"Jim," he whispered, putting a trembling hand on his friend's body.

The other lad woke at the touch. "What is it, Hal?"

"Did you hear anything?"

"Why, no! The wind, I reckon."

Indeed, there seemed to be something eerie in the atmosphere of the cold pre-dawn morning.

"It's not the wind. I must 'a' dreamed—that someone was walkin' on my grave."

"Sho! Nothin' to that, o' course. A fellow's liable to dream anything in a place like this."

"What's that?" Hal demanded suddenly.

"One of the horses movin' about. Say, boy, I never knew you have nerves before."

"Funny. Maybe I drank too much coffee, but sho! coffee never disturbed me before."

Presently they were both asleep again. The sun was flinging its warmth over a crotch in the hills before either of them awoke.

They prepared breakfast, ate, and packed. Hal was quite himself again. He laughed at the queer fear that had overtaken him.

"Like a kid," he said. "If it was one of the other boys with me, he'd certainly have the laugh on me."

They saddled. Jim's foot was in the stirrup when there came a sound of the snapping of twigs and the crashing of bushes.

"What's that?"

"A bear or a deer, likely," suggested his friend.

Out of the willows came a horse and rider. The two young fellows stared. The last thing they had expected to see was a man in this primeval wilderness.

He caught sight of them, stopped, and it seemed that in a fraction of a second a rifle jumped to his hands from the place beside the saddle. He sat for a moment motionless, voiceless, the weapon trained on Jim. At any moment he might fire. Not for an instant did he relax the wariness that reminded Jim of a coiled rattlesnake.

The man's eyes took in the camp fire, the evidences of an all-night stay, the fact that they were manifestly unprepared for hostilities. Still, he watched them with narrowed eyes malignly.

"Who are you? What are you doin' here?" he demanded.

Hal answered, not without resentment: "Couple o' riders from the Bar X Y, over Swamp Creek way. Why shouldn't we be here? A free country, ain't it?"

Jim was more conciliatory. He, too, like this stranger,

had become rigid with the concentration of focussed attention. Some sixth sense of danger warned him that there was more to this man's involuntary antagonism than momentary alarm. He had been on the lookout for danger, and for the moment it had personified itself in them.

"We're just kinda prospectin' around. Nothin' particular," Jim explained.

"Whajamean prospectin'?"

"Lookin' around."

"Who for?" demanded the harsh voice of the man. He was heavy set and broad shouldered. Above his bleak hard eyes a scar ran to the hair. The fellow was far from prepossessing.

"For nobody. Point of fact, for Lost Park."

"Why? What you aim to do there?"

"Nothing a-tall. Nothing but find it. The boys down to the ranch joshed us into a bet we couldn't locate it. So we're here to try. Know where it is?" This from Hal.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. But me, if I hadn't been invited to the park, why, I'd stay away. Understand?"

After another moment of hesitation, he lowered his rifle and rode forward.

"Sure." Hal barked a short laugh. "Here's yore hat, but don't hurry. We get that much."

"All right. Now you've got it, *vamos!*"

"That'll be up to us, I reckon, stranger," Hal returned, meeting him eye to eye. "We're not askin' where we can an' where we can't ride."

"No, but I'm tellin' you."

"Much obliged, an' now we'll do as we doggone please, likely."

"At yore own risk."

"Sure. We eat an' sleep an' straddle a bronc at our own risk. Nothin' new to that."

Again Jim spoke: "What's the objection to us takin' a look at Lost Park if we find it? Just so we can tell the boys we did."

The heavy-set man looked at him, wall-eyed. "I've been told strangers ain't welcome."

"I've heard that myself. Is it so?" Jim asked evenly.

Hal had been eyeing enviously the man's horse. It was a beautiful little gelding, almost black, with a skin as soft and shiny as satin. Its slender legs, the arch of its neck, the lines of the trim long body, all suggested more than a trace of the thoroughbred. One might have ridden a long day's journey in the ranch country without seeing a horse as beautiful. Young Shoreham could not lift his gaze from it.

"You've sure got a fine li'l horse," he said, and his eyes were shining.

The stranger's fishy eyes rested on Hal. Over his face there passed a change. The lines of it broke into an ingratiating smile. He examined the lad's horse with an interest evidently just awakened.

"The best hawss in the county," he said. "Y'betcha! Never was a better."

Hal could not keep his eager gaze from it. He loved the spirited little animal, as generous souls love everything that is beautiful.

"Too light for yore weight, ain't it?" he said.

"Yep. The only fault I got to find with it."

"Wisht I could trade mine in an' buy it, but I expect you'd want too much boot."

"I reckon." The stranger condescended to swing from the saddle and examine the legs of Hal's mount. "Sound?"

"Absolutely. A blamed good cow pony. A lot heavier than yours."

"Hmp! It don't get far with me. But I might trade—for enough boot."

Hal's face fell. "I only got twelve dollars."

"Chicken feed," sneered the scar-faced man. "How about yore friend?"

In Jim's breast a note of warning sounded. He did not like this man or trust him. He wanted Hal to have no dealings with him. But he could not say so directly. In the cow country it is not good form for an outsider to interfere in a horse trade. Hal was a man. He could look after himself. He would object to any suggestion of supervision.

"I have no money—none to speak of," Jim said curtly.

"How much?" demanded the stranger.

"I don't know. Six or seven dollars."

"Dig it up." The scar-faced man turned to Hal. "I like yore looks. My notion is you're on the level. Gimme what money you got an' leave twenty-five dollars for Buck Stone at Henson's store in Saponera. I'll call it a deal."

Hal fairly jumped at the offer. "You've made a trade, stranger."

"I'm throwin' away money. But this pony is too light for my weight. Tha's a fact."

"Yes," agreed Hal, almost trembling with eagerness.

"Yore broomtail has got more bone." Already the man was stripping the saddle from the little horse.

"You'll find this a mighty reliable cow pony." Hal, too, was busy unsaddling.

Jim observed that the stranger's eyes had more than once swept the park entrance anxiously.

"Where did you get yore pony? How long you had it?" asked Jim.

The wall eyes turned blankly on him. They said plainly

that this was none of his business, but the words the man spoke were less defiant.

"I raised him—practically. Come to that, how long has yore friend owned his?"

Hal laughed. "I've owned my new one less than five minutes. Tha's all that interests me." He was tremendously pleased and proud. All his distrust of this stranger had been swept away by his overpowering desire to own the beautiful little animal.

The stranger swung to the saddle and looked the boys over with contemptuous derision. "Kids outa the cradle," he sneered. "Hit the trail for home. *Pronto*. Tha's my advice. This is no country for you."

"Why not?" Jim asked, looking straight at him.

"Ever hear of Hughes Henry—or Black Tom?"

"They won't trouble us. We're not aimin' to do them any harm."

"How does Hughes know that? Give him a wide trail, I say. Four or five of his friends are out with him to-day. He's ridin' a paint hawss with a white head. I'm tellin' you to light out for home."

He grinned unpleasantly, then turned, rode into a gulch, and disappeared.



## CHAPTER II

### A BAD BREAK

**H**AL turned to his friend, grinning jubilantly. "Looks like I done bought a horse."

"Looks like," agreed Jim.

"Ever see such luck? I sure enough made the best trade ever I did. This li'l' pony is a peach. I'm callin' him Black Beauty."

Jim could not exactly put a reason to it, but he did not share Hal's enthusiasm. If he had been able to do so, he would have stopped the deal. But even if that had been possible, it was too late now.

"I wish you hadn't traded," he said.

"Why?" Hal looked at him in surprise. It dawned on him now that Jim had been rather silent while the trade was in progress and afterward.

"You made too good a trade. Why should that fellow make you a present of a good thing? I didn't like his looks. He's a bad lot."

"What do I care?—if the pony is sound, and I'll bet he is. See how the little skeezicks plays like he's bitin' my hand. Why, he's makin' friends already."

Its silky nose was nuzzling Hal. The boy was in the seventh heaven. "Some little beauty," he added fondly.

"What did he want to trust you for? How does he know you'll turn over that twenty-five to Henson?"

"Why, he figures I'm straight."

"I don't like it. I don't like him or anything about it. Where did he come from? Where is he going? Who is he?"

Hal stood back a little to admire the points of his new mount. He patted the sleek neck lovingly. "Darned if I know. Darned if I care. Gee, but he's a li'l' jim-dandy. Who would ever have figured I'd 'a' had such luck. Funny how things break. 'Way up here on the roof, a million miles from anywhere, I bump into——"

"Why for did he want to sell it so badly?"

"He didn't. I talked him into it, and o' course Black Beauty is too light for him."

"He meant to trade right from the first moment you admired his horse. I saw the idea come into his face. But why? Like you say, if this horse is sound, you skinned him to a frazzle. He's no fool. He knows that. All right. Why did he trade?"

"Search me. I dunno. But I'm darned glad he did. What's eatin' you anyhow, Jim?"

"I don't like his grin, or the way he looked at us, or his throwin' down on us with his gun soon as he saw us. Who did he think we were? What was he worryin' about?"

Hal grinned. "It was me was seeing things last night. It's you this mo'ning, old-timer. Buck up an' forget it."

"Hal, let's take his advice. It's good medicine. I'm for burnin' the wind for the ranch." Jim proposed this seriously and gravely.

The other lad stared at him in surprise. "Well, it's sure got you going, boy, like it had me last night. But I can't see a thing to it."

In the warm sunlight, glowing with the pride and joy of his his new acquisition, Hal had forgotten his dread of a few hours earlier. But he had lost, too, his desire to see Lost Park.

All that interested him was the horse. He was childlike in his eagerness of possession.

"I'm worried, Hal. I don't know why. But I am. There's some string to that horse trade. I know it by the way he was grinnin' at us. Maybe he's in with the Henry gang an' figures on takin' it from you."

This won Hal's entire attention. He could not think there was anything to it, still——

"Shucks, I reckon you're worryin' about nothing, Jim. You know how the boys will josh us if we go back right away."

"Let 'em. We can stand it. I'd like right well to hear their joshing right now."

"Why, if you want to go, I'm willin'. But I ain't ever seen you like this before. It ain't like you."

Jim could not explain his state of mind. He had become oppressed by a prescience of disaster, and yet he could not put a name to the thing he feared.

He grinned, a little shamefacedly. "I don't know. Reckon I've just lost my nerve."

"Tell you what," Hal compromised. "We'll look for that darned Lost Park this mo'ning. If we don't find it, we'll kinda drift east, still lookin' but workin' toward home. How's that?"

"Let's get away from here anyhow," Jim conceded reluctantly.

He was ashamed of his state of mind. The truth was that he was frightened, in terror of some unknown disaster hanging over them. He realized that his fear was childish, even though there was some basis for worry in the circumstances of the meeting with the wall-eyed man and its issue.

"I'm like a kid in the dark, afraid of my own shadow,"

Jim added. He looked around at the rough scarred landscape as though expecting something sinister to appear.

"The park ain't far from here, the way I figure it," Hal said. "That fellow probably lives there. If he spent last night at home, we can't be more'n a mile or two from there, don't you reckon?"

"Maybe so."

They had ridden scarcely a hundred yards when they were brought up by the sound of a shot. They turned in their saddles. Not three hundred yards from them a group of men, five in all, were clattering down the bare rocky slope where the boys had last night entered the valley. A puff of smoke billowed out from a rifle.

"Hell's bells! They're firin' at us," Hal cried in the excitement. And an instant later, "It's the Henry gang—see the paint hawss."

The boys turned, by a common instinct, to flight. If they had had older heads they might have waved a handkerchief, held up their hands, and stayed to parley. But they did not think of that. They raced up the valley because it was the only direction left them. There might be an exit there. There might not.

The shots continued. A spatter of sand in front of them showed where a bullet ploughed into the ground. Another bullet cut off clean a willow twig not two feet from Jim's head.

Ahead of them, scarce sixty yards away, the valley seemed to end, with no visible exit, in steep cliffs.

Hal was leading. "Which way? We gotta find a way out," he called back over his shoulder. He pulled up for a moment, to let Jim join him.

A small cañon opened between the cliffs. Into this they dashed. It was tortuous and steep. They rounded a bend but could hear the pursuit pounding after them. Glancing

back, Jim saw the first rider swing into sight. The man yelled something indistinguishable, either to them or to his companions.

The boys urged their mounts forward. It was rough going, with heavy underbrush. Coming to a clump of aspens, Jim turned down toward the bed of the gulch, his friend swung to the right, above the grove. They expected to join each other at the other side of the grove. But the course Jim had chosen forced him farther down the side of the gorge. He saw nothing of Hal, but for a moment he had caught a glimpse of a draw, a pocket in the rock wall. Probably his friend was flying up this. He called to Hal, but if he received any answer, the clattering of his horse's hoofs drowned it.

What should he do? Ought he to ride back and try to rejoin Hal? If he did, the outlaws would cut him off. There would be no time to retrace his way before they reached the point where he and Hal had separated. It was more than possible that his friend would rejoin him where the aspens pinched out near the head of the gulch.

As he rode, he kept looking for Hal. A bullet struck a rock to the left of him. He turned. The man on the paint horse gave a shout. He could not stop now.

He put his horse at the steep pocket in which the gulch ended, and Four Bits clambered up the loose shale like a cat. As he went up, outlined against the rocky wall, two more shots were fired at him. There was a swift sharp stab of pain in his right leg. He looked down at his boot. A small round hole showed where the bullet had torn through the leather leg of the boot into the muscles of his calf.

At the summit he swung round for an instant to look back. There was no sign of Hal. Two men had reached the farther end of the pocket in which the gulch ended. He raised

his rifle and fired. It was high time he warned them that he meant to fight and that they would come on farther at their own peril.

He spurred into the pines, saw before him two draws, chose the lower, and found himself once more winding his way into a growth of young trees. Once or twice he stopped to listen. As far as he could make out the pursuit had died away. Either the men had taken the upper gulch or else they had taken his hint and stopped, afraid that he might pick them off from cover as they emerged into the open climb at the gulch head.

Jim wondered about his leg. The pain was less sharp now but he knew that blood was running down into his boot. It probably would not be an especially serious wound if it could be given attention, but he was afraid to pull off his boot for fear he might not be able to put it on again.

He was anxious about Hal. Had he, too, made his escape? His horse was fast. Jim felt sure of that. But this would avail him nothing if he had run into an impasse from which he could not get out.

Jim hardly knew what to do. It would be folly to return and be caught, only to learn that Hal was safe. On the other hand, he could not leave Hal in the lurch. Perhaps, if he lay low for a time and then returned cautiously, he might learn what had become of his friend.

There was something about the whole affair that puzzled him, something he did not understand. Why had these men come shooting? Why had they not ridden up and questioned the two boys instead of taking so instantly an attitude of hostility? It could not be that the Henry gang shot down every traveller, every prospector who came into this part of the country. After all, though it was remote, the Lost Park district was still a part of the good old U. S. A.



Even Hughes Henry could not be the whole law and the gospel.

Jim was still a boy and he had not yet learned to make clear decisions instantly. What was the right thing to do, the wisest? He did not know. His experience had never covered a case like this. Of course, he had no smallest intention of deserting his friend. But there was no use in delivering himself up quixotically to these man-hunters who had tried to murder him. Certainly not if Hal had succeeded in making an escape.

The first thing, of course, was to join forces with Hal again. The second to get back to civilization as soon as they could. He reasoned that in Hal's place, after he had made his escape, as soon as it was safe, he would make his return to the point where they had been forced to separate, on the assumption that Jim would do the same. Therefore, after a reasonable time, he, too, ought to return.

Waiting was a trying business, especially with the ache of his wounded leg to remind him that delay might prove dangerous. He could not be sure that some of the enemy were not stalking him. Behind a big rock, still on horseback, he took cover, deciding that he would wait one hour before retracing his way. During that sixty minutes he spent an anxious week. They might have shot his pal. He felt a little faint from the steady drip of blood. Already his sock was soggy. A dozen times he almost gave up and went back but he forced himself to stick to his schedule. The life he had led had schooled him to patience.

His return was cautious. It was possible, though he persuaded himself not likely, that the outlaws might be waiting for him. Temperamentally, they were probably hasty and restless. Nor could it be a matter of any prime importance for them to get him. He had no money, nothing of value

save his horse and saddle, and there must be plenty of horses in their hide-outs.

He tried to move as noiselessly as possible. The sound of his moving horse, of the brushing of scrub oak against his stirrup leathers, was accented to his excited fancy. He had never before noticed how much noise a moving horse makes.

But slowly he made his way down the gulch to the clump of willows which had separated him and Hal. He dismounted and examined the tracks. Several horsemen had evidently followed Hal. Later, they had returned. He could tell this because the tracks going up the draw were partially obliterated by later ones pointing in the opposite direction. Either they had captured Hal or they had given up the chase. Which?

The boy's heart pounded like that of a small rabbit in one's hand. His nerves were keyed to a high pitch. It was as though a bell of disaster tolled in him. He felt none of the elation of adventure racing through his blood. For he was somehow sure, with no evidence upon which to base his certainty, that his friend had been captured.

What would they do to him? Surely nothing serious. They would probably frighten him and turn him loose. Perhaps they would take his horse.

Should he follow up the draw or take the down trail to the valley where they had camped? He decided to go up. Those blurred hoof marks seemed to draw his reluctant feet. He led Four Bits, watching warily in order not to be taken at disadvantage.

He swung round a curve—and pulled up sharply. What he saw took him by the throat and sent a shiver of horror down his spine. He stood there frozen, his dilated eyes never lifting from the horrible thing that almost stilled his heart. God in heaven, it could not be!

### CHAPTER III

#### "ALL HORSE THIEVES TAKE WARNING"

**B**ENEATH a live-oak tree a man was standing, his horse by his side. The man was the one who had called himself Buck Stone, who had less than two hours earlier swapped horses with Hal. He was looking at the same dreadful sight which chilled Jim's blood with horror and held him rooted with paralyzing fear to the ground. It was the body of a man, hanging by a rope from a branch of the live oak and gently swaying in the breeze. While Jim looked, frozen to stillness, the scar-faced man mounted and rode directly at a rock wall back of the tree. It was almost as though the wall opened up to receive him, for he seemed to pass through it as though it had no substance.

Jim trembled like a leaf of an aspen. He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. For the body turning in the breeze was that of his friend and pal, the boy who had camped with him on many a night herd, whose laughter he had heard ring out a thousand times gaily.

They had killed him cruelly, for some obscure purpose of their own had hanged him like a criminal.

With a rush, life flowed back into his veins. He vaulted into the saddle and galloped forward. Even as he covered that one hundred and fifty yards, he knew what he meant to do. He forced Four Bits, the horse trembling and looking askance at the body, directly under the live-oak branch.

Standing in the saddle, with his knife Jim sawed through the rope. The body slid through his arms to the ground.

In a second, he was kneeling beside it, loosening the loop of the rope from the throat. He knew it was no use, that his friend was dead, but he tried to force water from his canteen through the clenched lips. Failing in this, he tried to pump air into the lungs, as one does in the case of a drowned man.

It was of no avail. They had murdered him. Yet he called on Hal to speak, to open his eyes, to let him know he was not dead.

At last he arose, his face white and rigid. His lips moved but he did not say anything. He was dreadfully shaken by the shock.

A paper caught his eye. He remembered now that it had been pinned to the body and had probably been torn from the coat by the fall. Upon it someone had printed roughly some words with an indelible pencil.

TO THE LOST PARK GANG  
ALL HORSE THIEVES TAKE WARNING

Thrown into a mental daze by the discovery of the tragic fate of his friend, Jim did not at first take in the import of the words. Presently his brain groped with this in a dull way. Whoever had murdered the lad had left this note here to explain the meaning of their deed. But why, if Hugh Henry's gang had done it, should they leave a note to themselves? And why should they practically accuse Hal of being a horse thief?

The answer came to him in a flash. It was not the Lost Park outlaws who had killed the boy. The wall-eyed man who had sold Hal the horse, the fellow who had called himself Buck Stone, had stolen it and was heading for the park

when he met them. He had known the pursuit was hot on his heels. Perhaps the posse had got between him and the entrance to the hide-out of the Henry outfit. He was alarmed. If he should be caught with the horse, or without any horse in a country where nobody walked but everybody rode, the avengers would give him short shrift. It was necessary for him to get another horse at once. When he met the two youths from the Bar X Y he had seen a way out. He had made up his mind to get one of their horses and with adroit cunning had used Hal's admiration of the stolen animal to effect an exchange.

The members of the posse had, of course, assumed that Hal was the horse thief. They had been following the miscreant for days, closely, no doubt. Probably they had more than once been on the verge of capturing him. Buck Stone's manifest anxiety told Jim that much. When the posse finally captured Hal, they had overridden his protests summarily.

This fellow, this Buck Stone, had murdered his friend as surely as though he had shot him with his own hand. He had known, when he made the horse trade, that the young range riders would very likely be taken and made to pay the penalty of his crime. He had done it deliberately, with sinister intent, to save his own skin at their expense. There had even been a kind of cruel chuckle in his manner, a snarling pride in the cunning which had tricked them.

There began to burn in Jim's breast the first great hate of his life. Over the body of his dead friend he lifted his right hand and swore a low-voiced solemn oath. "Some day I'll get him, Hal, so help me God, if I live an' he lives." He looked down into the white face of the dead boy and added a rider. "I'll meet up with him sure, an' when I do, it'll be him or me one; I'm makin' you a promise, old pardner."

He knelt down and searched gently the pockets of his friend. He found a knife, a tobacco pouch, some matches, a pipe, a stubby lead pencil, and an old envelope. On the back of this last had been scrawled a note.

They're hanging me. They won't believe I didn't steal this horse. Good-bye, old pal. I hope you make your getaway.

HAL.

Jim's face worked. His Adam's apple shot up and down like a barometer. His eyes filmed with tears. He stooped and kissed the cold face of the boy he had loved.

"Good-bye, Hal," he said softly.

He rose and limped to his horse and drew from its scabbard the hatchet they used for cutting wood. In a sandy spot, he began to dig with it. He used the point of the hatchet for a shovel and the face of it for a spade. It was a slow business, but, after a long time, he had fashioned a hollow deep enough and wide enough for a shallow grave. Into this he put the body, covering the face tenderly with the bandanna handkerchief which he had been wearing around his neck. He refilled the grave, packing down the dirt gently with the palm of his hand.

All this time he had been vaguely aware that his leg was paining and that he was growing weaker. When he had finished burying his friend, he started to rise. But the change in posture must have increased his giddiness. Instead, he toppled over, fainting for the first time in his life.

How long he was unconscious he did not know. When he came to himself the sun was beating hotly down. Almost at once his heart filled with the sickness of realization of the situation. His hand passed lightly over the packed soil of the new-made grave. Hal was gone.

He rose, stiffly. His horse was still waiting patiently a

dozen yards away. Jim hobbled over, pulled himself to the saddle, and rode forward to that rock wall into which the man who called himself Buck Stone had vanished. The wall was a great slab of sandstone tip-tilted on end. In front of it, about the centre, growing almost up against it, was a clump of aspens.

Jim rode along the face of the great rock and made a discovery. The wall was not one single rock but two. These were practically parallel to each other; the end of one was set three or four feet back of the other. In this gap was the thin clump of young aspens.

It was not till he rode back along the wall that he made a more startling discovery. A narrow path wound in and out among the aspens toward the gap between the rock faces. He followed this, for perhaps twenty-five yards, passing between the two great slabs of sandstone.

Then, to his amazement, he stood on the farther edge of the gap and looked down on a mountain park of some size which nestled down among the cliffs which surrounded it. The park held an area of three or four square miles, he guessed. In it were gulches, woods, and open pasture land.

He realized that by some strange chance he had found Lost Park.



## CHAPTER IV

### IN LOST PARK

**E**XCEPT down near the centre of the park, where the open pasture lay, the terrain was very rough. It would be possible, Jim guessed, for a man to lie holed up here and escape detection even if the entrance to the park should be discovered.

This Buck Stone had not been willing to take his fighting chance. He had been afraid that the posse would come on the two youngsters, learn that he had been on the scene, and follow him by the tracks of his horse into the park. Perhaps he was unpopular there. Perhaps he had feared betrayal. At any rate, with the sly cunning of a fox, he had seen a way to wriggle out of danger by passing it on to the two lads.

From a clump of trees, below a side hill, there rose a lazy thin banner of smoke. Down in that hollow there was probably a house. It might be the one where Stone lived.

The young man's judgment told him that this was no time to go seeking vengeance. He ought first to get his wound healed. Moreover, he ought not to be alone. Some of his friends from the Bar X Y should be with him when he went on this mission. Stone might be living with friends. Certainly, he was in his own stronghold here, and Jim was a very long way from help.

But young Turner was persistent temperamentally. Why not creep forward and examine the lay of the land? If he found Stone alone, good; if not, he might find where he lived

and return later with his friends. The house was close—not more than three or four hundred yards away. Perhaps, in a very few minutes, he might get all the information he needed. He easily persuaded himself that it was better to find out a little more about this Lost Park and its inhabitants before returning to the ranch. His wound seemed to have stopped bleeding. The pain of it had deadened. Since he had so far to go, a very little farther would make no difference.

He rode slowly toward the smoke, keeping well up near the lip of the saucer-shaped park. His rifle lay in his hands ready for instant action. With slow, deliberate gaze, he swept the woods below him and in front, searching every bit of cover for a hidden enemy. It was conceivable that Stone was lying in the brush watching to see if the posse followed him into the park. And this was a case where it very likely would be impossible later to remedy any errors he might make. He recalled the old adage that dead men tell no tales. That probably would be Stone's reaction to the sight of an armed man riding cautiously along the ledge.

In a thick clump of young pines, he dismounted and fastened his horse with a slip knot that could be untied in a second, if necessary, for he knew that his getaway might be a very hurried one. He crept down toward the back of the house that showed through the trees, moving with very great care and keeping under cover as much as possible. From behind the trunk of a tree he would search the landscape before making a short run to the next bush or shrub behind which he could crouch.

He could see now, as he knelt behind a pine, that the house was built of logs but was a commodious one. It had two stories and perhaps six or seven rooms. There were out-houses, a barn, and a mountain corral. Whoever lived here was a person of some consequence.

Nobody was in sight. He could see chickens scratching around the barn and three horses in the corral. On a clothes-line fluttered a washing hung out to dry. From which he drew the easy deduction that a woman lived here.

He slipped down the steep hillside a little farther. This was as near the house as he meant to go. The grove was thinning out, and he felt that it would not be safe to go closer. Besides, it was time for him to be back-tracking. He had many, many miles to travel, and he could not tell how long his strength would endure. He began to feel faint again.

It was a rocky slope. Just before he reached the tree from which he meant to make his final observation, there was a sharp drop of the ground. A loose rock rested on the spot where he would naturally have put his foot. He took a longer step in order to miss it. Somehow the wounded leg collapsed beneath his weight. His body plunged forward and down. The rifle went off as he slid along. A bolt of fiery pain shot through him. He fainted for a second time.

He opened his eyes upon a surprise.

A girl was bending over him. She was brown as the swimmers he had once seen on a California beach. Her hair was crinkly brown, her deep liquid eyes of the same colour and set in a smooth tanned face with an underlying pigment of red. At the moment when he came back, she was staring at him in startled fear.

They looked at each other without speaking, at least for that dubious moment before she found her voice.

"You've shot yourself," she said.

He considered that a perceptible instant in view of the evidence at hand. "I don't think so," he answered. "It's this leg. They shot me."

"Who?"

"I don't know. The posse."

"When?"

"This mo'ning—outside the park."

Her next question swung abruptly to another subject.

"If I help you, can you walk to the house?"

"My horse is back there in that clump. I reckon I'll try to make the ranch."

"What ranch?"

"The Bar X Y, where I come from, Swamp Creek way."

"You'd never make it, never in the world," she answered.

"You've got to have that leg looked to. Right away."

He felt she was right. It would not be possible for him to stand the hard jolting of several days on horseback, alone, wounded, with no help at hand.

But he made his protest. "I got to go." Then, "Who lives here?"

"What's that got to do with it?" she demanded sharply.

"Come! I'll help you rise."

"Buck Stone—does he live here?"

"Never heard of him. Try to raise yourself when I put my arm under your shoulders."

"I can make it fine," he boasted. But when he got to his feet he swayed so that only the strength of her muscular, lean arm kept him from falling.

"Put your hand around my waist," she ordered.

So, with her arm, too, round his body, very slowly they descended to the house. The weakness and the pain were almost too much for him, but at last they reached the porch and he sank down on it. He could tell that the jolt of his fall had set the wound bleeding afresh.

She ran upstairs and brought down a pillow. This she put under his head. Then, with a sharp-pointed hunting

knife she cut away the leg of the boot. More than once he winced, but he managed to clamp his jaws on the groans that almost would out.

The boot was soggy with blood when she at last worked it from his foot. The sticky stocking was dyed red. She brought cold water in a basin from a spring. She found clean rags for bandages.

He watched the awkward but gentle way her fingers moved about his leg while they washed and dressed the wound. And while her eyes were cast down at the work she was doing he had time to appraise this slim brown young thing who was befriending him. There was a quality of wildness about her, the wildness of shy woodland creatures so easily startled into flight. Her movements had at times the awkwardness of fledgling youth, yet somehow they had, too, the ultimate grace of natural freedom. She had none of the mannerisms that had been acquired by the town girls Jim knew. She was spontaneous, herself, even though at the same time naïvely self-conscious.

After she had finished, after she had propped his wounded leg on another pillow, she flung at him point-blank the question in her mind.

"Who are you? Where d'you come from?"

"I'm Jim Turner. From Swamp Creek, like I said."

"What you doing here?"

"I came, me an' my pal, to look for Lost Park. The boys joshed us into it."

"Your pal?"

Jim's face worked spasmodically. The muscles twitched. He felt he was going to play the baby. He could not put the dreadful fact into utterance. He took refuge in silence.

She repeated again her words, a little sharply: "Your pal, you said. Where is he?"

He fought down the insurgent swelling in his throat, the emotional impulse to break down. "He's—dead."

"Dead?"

His words came gruffly. "They killed him."

"But who?" Her big eyes had dilated. There was in them anxiety as well as horror. He could have sworn that there had come into her heart a foreboding, a fear lest she herself, through friends or relatives, might somehow be involved in this tragedy.

"The posse. They thought he'd stolen a horse. They found him with it. So they—hanged him." His voice broke. He gulped down a sob.

"But—hadn't he—taken the horse?" she asked gently.

"No. A man swapped horses with him. This mo'ning. Right outside the gates of the park. Then the posse came a-shootin'. We thought it was the Hughes Henry gang, because this fellow, this Buck Stone, said he was ridin' a paint hawss with a white head. So we lit out."

"But he isn't—Uncle Hughes isn't. He's ridin' a sorrel."

"Anyhow, we made a blue streak to get away an' went up the cañon. We got separated, Hal an' me. They ran him up a pocket where he couldn't get away. Then—they hanged him. He—he left me a note."

He felt in his pocket, blindly, for the note, and when he had found it, he passed it across to her. There came to him a sudden picture of Hal Shoreham writing the note, probably with the noose already around his throat, and at the vision he broke down completely. He turned away from the girl, ashamed of himself, and buried his head on his arm on the pillow.

After a little, he pulled himself together, brushed his eyes with his sleeve, and turned to excuse himself for "playing the baby," as he would have put it. But the girl had gone.

After a few minutes, she returned with a glass of water.

"With that wound you must be burnin' up for a drink," she said. "I ought to have thought of that before."

But he knew she had gone away because she knew he would be ashamed to have a witness of his emotion. He thought it sweet of her to show so much consideration. It would have been so easy to have made a mistake, to have tried to comfort him. How had this untutored little child of the hills known that it was better to leave him alone and ignore the uncontrollable display of feeling? Was it that all women are that way, he wondered, finer grained than men, quicker to sense instinctively the working of the mind?

He took the water. His eyes fell away from hers, ashamed. While he drank, he looked at her covertly over the rim of the glass. Her eyes were on the road that ran up from the valley to the house. Jim followed them. Two men were riding up the incline.



## CHAPTER V

### PAT HAS HER OWN WAY

THE men riding toward the house were both large of build. The one on the sorrel was heavy set, broad of shoulder, and straight of body. He was in his later fifties probably, but when he swung from the saddle and came up the slope to the porch he walked with the forceful energy of one in whom the sap of life still flows abundantly. His companion was lankier, more loosely built, and so dark as to give at first the impression of some southern foreign blood.

The first man pulled up on the porch steps. His keen eyes took in Jim, then passed to the girl. Under the heavy grizzled brows they looked fierce, these blue eyes. Just now they were flinging a swift wordless question.

"This is Mr. Turner, Uncle Hughes," she explained. "He's been wounded."

Hughes Henry wasted no words in diplomacy. "What's he doing here, Pat?" he demanded.

"I found him, unconscious, back of the house."

The lank man spoke. "Back of the house. Goddlemighty, how'd he come there?"

"He came from Swamp Creek way, he and a friend, lookin' for Lost Park. And the most dreadful thing has happened."

The dark man cut in on her explanations. "Lookin' for Lost Park! What for?"

"We'd always heard about the park down at the ranch, the Bar X Y," Jim explained, "an' the boys kinda bantered my friend an' me into comin' to look for it."

"Sounds likely," the dark man came back, with a short, unpleasant bark of a scornful laugh.

"But it's true," the girl cried. "And, oh, Uncle Hughes, his friend was killed this morning. They hanged him."

Both of the big men looked first at her and then at the wounded lad, struck dumb for a moment with blank astonishment. Hughes Henry was the first to speak.

"Who hanged him?" He turned to young Turner. "Come clean. Let's have the straight of this. No shenanigan, boy."

Jim told his story, from beginning to end. When he had finished, the Lost Park men looked at each other.

"How's that hit you, Tom?" Henry asked of the other.

"Why, if you ask me, I think it's all a damned lie," Black Tom Truesdale answered promptly. "I never did hear such a rigmarole of lies in all my days. He's a spy. Tha's my opinion, short an' sharp."

"Think he shot himself for the fun of it?" asked Pat indignantly.

"Easy to prove his story, if it's so," Hughes Henry said. "He claims he buried his friend. We'll see if he did."

"Of course," Pat cried. "The poor boy ought to be buried properly." She turned to the wounded lad. "Tell them just where you left the body."

Jim hesitated. He did not want unfriendly hands touching roughly his friend. Yet he could not refuse to satisfy their demand for verification. Accurately he described the place of temporary burial.

"We'll know right soon whether there's anything in this fairy tale," Truesdale said. "If not——"

His eyes, a very light blue, contrasted strangely with the dark pigment of the face. They were hard eyes, almost expressionless in repose, but just now cruelly sinister. He was notorious as a killer. It was known that he had shot four men, and there was talk of seven or eight. Rumour had it that he was given to sudden passions, especially when in liquor, and those who met him generally sidestepped any possibility of trouble with the desperado.

People wondered how Hughes Henry controlled him, for it was recognized that Black Tom accepted the leadership of the other. Henry was not a desperado in the same sense as his companion. He was no "bad man," no killer in the sense the word is usually applied. But he had brains. He was strong willed, and nobody ever doubted his courage or his ability to look out for himself in an emergency. He was, too, ten years older than Black Tom.

Pat had drawn him to one side and was holding an urgent, low-voiced monologue with him. At least, it was almost a monologue. Pat poured forth a torrent of impetuous words. She was insisting imperiously upon something at which her uncle demurred. To Jim it was rather fascinating to see how this slim little thing stood up to the big man whose name was becoming a legend among mothers with which to awe their bad children. She was not in the least afraid of him, apparently. If he tried to argue with her, she rode him down with a fresh outburst. It was plain that he was very fond of her and that she knew how to get her own way. At last he surrendered with a gesture of impatient indulgence and a little rueful laugh.

"Have it yore own way. You will anyhow," he told her.

He came forward and spoke to Black Tom, drawing him aside for a second whispered conference. The wounded man caught the subject of their talk but not all that was said.

"Pat wants him taken up to Bob's room. I reckon I'll let her have it like she wants."

"You runnin' a hospital for spies?" Black Tom asked sourly.

Hughes Henry drew him farther aside and Jim lost what followed, till at last Black Tom broke away.

"All right. Have it the way she wants. It's yore house, an' she's yore kid. But if Pat was mine——"

He took in her slim straight figure with a black scowl.

She retorted with light impudence but with no anger. She had won her point and was elated. "You'd wear me to a frazzle with a willow sapling, wouldn't you?" she mocked, making a face at him. "It's too bad I'm not yours. Uncle Hughes has brought me up so badly."

"He hasn't brought you up at all, you li'l' catamount. Now, Bob's a right nice boy. How a brother an' sister can be so different beats me. Trouble is, you wind Hughes round yore li'l' finger."

"Yes," agreed Henry amiably, "I reckon she does." He had taken her when she was almost a baby, and in his eyes she was the wonder of the world.

"How nice it would be to be your wife, Tom," the girl derided. "When you marry, will you whip her only when she needs it?"

"Say, girl," he retorted hastily, "I wouldn't marry you if you was the only woman in the world."

"How nice," she retorted. "There are two of us of the same mind."

"Behave yoreself, Pat," her uncle ordered. "Go up an' get the bed ready."

She was off like a shot, moving in that same effortless way that deer do when they leap, as though not from muscular effort but from the springiness of their feet.

Hughes picked up young Turner in his arms and carried him easily up the stairway into a bedroom above. There were no sheets on the bed, but the blankets were clean. The furniture was homemade and rough. It consisted of a bed, a stand, a chair, and a cheap looking glass. The room had been recently swept, but was littered with the possessions of its owner. These were scattered in a profuse disorder. Chaps, spurs, underwear, a pair of gray jeans, a crumpled red bandanna, and a dusty old sombrero were among the things that littered the floor. On the stand were cartridges, a sack from which tobacco was spilling, flies and a leader for fishing, a stud, a broken-toothed comb, some small change, a corn-cob pipe, and a mail-order house catalogue.

The big man looked doubtfully at the patient. "How about his laig? Think I'd better look at it?" he asked.

Pat was not sure. In that country of no doctors and many accidents, where riders were often thrown from fractious animals and bones broken, she had helped more than once to dress wounds. But she had never done this before alone.

"I don't know," she said. "I tried to be careful. I washed it with cold water and the cloths I used were clean."

"S all right," Jim cut in. "She did a good job. Anyhow, it's nothing but a flesh wound. No bone struck. I reckon it was the loss of blood that kinda knocked me out."

Hughes departed. Presently Jim heard the two men ride away. Pat busied herself tidying up the room. She scolded her absent brother in sisterly fashion for his untidiness.

"Bob's the worst ever. He never puts anything away, but just drops it wherever he gets through with it."

"Is he older than you or younger?"

"We're twins. Our parents died when we were little and Uncle Hughes took us. We've lived with him ever since."

"Pat is a funny name for a girl," he volunteered.

"Oh, that's not my real name. It's Pattie. But everybody calls me Pat for short. When I was a little bit of a girl, I wanted to be a boy, and whenever anybody asked what my name was, I said Pat. So they called me Pat. Now, you're not to talk. It's not good for you. I'll leave a pitcher of cold water beside you, and you're to try to go to sleep. That's what will do you most good—that, and food when you're ready for it."

She left him, after bringing the water, and Jim realized after she had gone that he was exhausted.

He fell asleep with a smile on his lips.

## CHAPTER VI

### "COME CLEAN, BOY"

LATER in the day, Pattie brought Jim some chicken broth. His sleep had done him good, and though he suspected that he had some fever, it was not high enough to make him unhappy. The girl watched him while he ate, propped up by pillows.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Pretty good. I'm kinda peaked, but I'm gonna make the grade."

He had never been ill a day in his life except when he had had measles in his infancy, at least, as far back as he could remember. It was a new sensation to have this feeling of weakness due to loss of blood, this sense of having had the strength drained out of his body. When he lifted his hand, it had an odd heaviness, as though it were weighted with lead. His mind, too, had a curious detachment from all the past years of active life, of hard riding in wind and sun and driving sleet and of the warm friendliness of bunkhouse and camp fire. It was as though somehow this whole episode—from the first night when he and Hal had camped together in the mountains to this present moment of invalidism with wild, shy Pattie Hughes as his nurse—belonged to some shadowy unreality that presently would melt like a mist before the sun. He would wake up, to hear the joshing of his companions at the Bar X Y and Hal Shoreham's gay laughter. He had never heard anybody laugh quite like Hal, with such



a merry bubbling of mirth from within to his crinkling eyes.

Pattie answered, flashing at him that swift look of a startled deer: "You're not in pain much, are you?"

"Feelin' fine—good as the wheat."

"Folks get well fast up here, an' I reckon it's so down in your ranch country. It's livin' outdoors an' being hardy, don't you think?"

"It's a fact we've not got much use for doctors except when we bust a leg or get stove up when a bronc piles us. I expect we are hardy all right. In towns folks are always gettin' puny an' sending for the doc."

"Back here in the hills, we don't usually get a doctor even when someone gets piled an' hurted, unless he's right bad. We fill him up with whisky till some ole-timer comes along an' fixes him up. Uncle Hughes is 'most as good as a doctor, anyhow."

"He looks like some man, yore uncle."

"Oh, he is," the girl cried. "And a good man, too, though lots of folks don't know that. He's not like Black Tom—or that Sam Marshall."

"I don't reckon I know Sam Marshall," Jim said. He reserved his opinion of Black Tom. This was no safe and proper place to express it. At the Bar X Y, for instance, he might say a few words on the subject that would be forceful and unfettered. As to Hughes Henry—well, it was just like a woman to think that he was a good man because he was good to her. For the matter of that, who wouldn't be good to this slim, tanned young creature? It was not particularly to the credit of her uncle.

"Have they come back yet?" he asked.

"No. They would have to stop, you know, to—to bury him."

"Yes." Then, with an abrupt swing of the mind back to the girl herself: "Did you say you had always lived here—in the park?"

"Since I was a little trick."

"You go to town sometimes?"

"Not often. I don't like it down there." She added by way of explanation, "Folks look at me."

They would, he thought, partly because her clothes were probably wholly out of style, and also because she was one to draw the eye by reason of that something wild and shy and untamed in her body and her bearing, in the motions of her lithe limbs which somehow achieved grace in spite of a certain uncouthness of youth.

"But is there a school up here? Where did you learn to read and write and everything?"

"From an old man named Homer Tedrow. He came up here with his daughter when I was a little girl because—because someone broke up his home. He's educated—knows everything about books. So he came an' lived here an' taught Bob and me and Sue—that's her name, his daughter, I mean. Of course, he helped on the ranch some, too. He's got a shack back in the woods now. I'll take you there some day."

"Do they live there together?"

"Yes, the two of them, with his books. He's got pretty nearly every book in the world, I shouldn't wonder. Anyhow, he's got a roomful, an' they overflow into the lean-to."

"I didn't know that men of that sort——" Jim stopped, aware that the remark he had contemplated was not a happy one.

The girl flushed, understanding. "You thought nobody but horse thieves and robbers and bad men lived here. That's a wicked lie, that story is. Just because some of

them come here and hide doesn't mean that we're all that way. If you think that——"

His smile was friendly and disarming. It stopped the jet of angry words. "Would I be likely to think that—after what you've done for me?" he asked.

"Yes, but you think Uncle Hughes is—is like they say he is. I know you do. I read it in your face when I said he was good. We've got a bad name in the park, an' it's just because we're hospitable."

"I reckon I should be the last fellow to object to yore hospitality," he said. "You didn't ask me any questions. I was a stranger, an' you took me in, like the Bible says. I'm only hopin' I won't have to burden you long."

"It's not a burden," she denied promptly. "You're welcome—to what we have. We're not fixed as well as town folks because it's hard to bring things up here. But if you can put up with what we've got——"

"I've lived in the bunkhouse of a ranch for several years," he said, smiling. "I reckon I can, at a pinch, put up with good cooking for a change."

She left him then, charging him once more to sleep if he could. Probably he did, for it was beginning to be dusk when he heard voices again downstairs and presently footsteps ascending.

Hughes Henry came into the room, and behind him the brown slip of a girl. Jim looked at him, and waited silently.

"We buried yore friend," said Henry abruptly.

"You're satisfied," the boy said, "about my coming here."

"I'm satisfied that part of yore story is true." Under the shaggy eyebrows he looked hard at the lad. "But come clean. Don't pull any cock-an'-bull story on me. You stole that horse, you an' yore friend."

"No," denied Jim.

"I never heard of this Buck Stone you claim traded you the horse. What was he like?"

Jim tried to recollect, to fasten the fellow's appearance definitely. He remembered the scar, but he could not recall just where it had been.

"A kinda bad-lookin' fellow—mean, sort of. He had a scar."

"Whereabouts?"

"I can't seem to place it exactly."

"A big man?"

"I'd say solid an' heavy set rather than big. I didn't like his eyes, or anything about him."

"Well, there's no Buck Stone up in this country." Hughes Henry took a turn up and down the room. "Now, looky here, boy. I want to know where I'm at. When someone comes an' asks my help, he's got to hand out the truth to me. Lies don't go with me. Understand? Where did you get that horse?"

The young man's eyes did not flinch. "I've done told you."

"You've handed me the same line horse thieves always pull when they get caught whilst they are makin' their get-away. I've heard it right often. It won't do."

"But if it's the truth, Uncle," Pattie interrupted.

Over his shoulder, without looking at her, Hughes Henry spoke curtly. "You keep outa this, girl. It's between me an' him."

"All I can say is that you can write to Walter K. Trapper an' ask him for information about me. He owns the Bar X Y. You musta met him."

"Yes, I've met him," Henry answered grimly. "Met him an' had trouble with him. What he says doesn't go a long way with me. But that's not all. Mails don't run what you

would call regular to Lost Park. If I wrote, an' if he answered my letter—which he might or might not—probably I wouldn't hear inside of a month."

"Well, what can I do?"

"You can come clean. Tha's what I want."

"An' that's what I'm doing."

They came to a deadlock there. Jim stuck to his story, held to it so staunchly that Henry half believed him against his better judgment. The older man was annoyed at his persistence. Horse thieves and other criminals were nothing new in his experience. For years they had come flying to the park for safety. Sometimes they had been allowed to remain. Sometimes they had been advised to keep going. On one or two occasions, owing to exceptional circumstances, they had been returned to the authorities. But there was one condition precedent without which they were not received at all. They had to come through with the true story of what had taken place.

Henry passed judgment on his involuntary guest. "You'll stay in the house till the day you leave. Then I'll see you outa the park. After that, you're none of my business. Understand?"

"S all right with me," assented the boy. "Couldn't ask fairer than that."

"Mind," went on Henry harshly, "I don't guarantee a thing. Tom has different notions. He thinks you're some kind of a spy. Like enough you are. I don't know. But you're in my house. Pat here took you in. Long as you're here you are safe."

"Do you mean he isn't safe when he leaves here?" asked Pattie.

Henry paid no attention whatever to her question. He

knew it was a challenge, and he did not intend to be deflected just now from laying down to his unwelcome guest the state of the situation.

"After that—well, it's yore own lookout. If Tom lays for you—or some of the other boys—don't blame me. When I've turned my back on you, I'm through."

Jim nodded. "I get that, Mr. Henry."

"If you had come through clean with the truth! But, no, you've got to play innocent when you're guilty as hell. Why, that fairy tale about swappin' horses with a stranger you never saw before wouldn't fool a baby in arms. I was ridin' these hills long before you were born, an' I never yet knew anyone make a trade like that. It's one of those stories that fellows pull when they're up against it."

"All the same, it's true," insisted Jim quietly. "We didn't steal the horse, an' I'm not gonna say we did."

"All right. Stick to yore story," the Lost Park leader flung out impatiently. "But don't look to me when you get into trouble. I'm not gonna help anyone who comes to me with a pack of lies. If he won't trust me, why, I won't trust him."

"But, Uncle, don't you see——"

The ranchman swung round on Pattie and gave orders sharply. "You get outa here if you can't mind yore own business, girl."

"Can't I say a word without you flying out at me? Do you have to treat me like a baby just because I want you to be reasonable?"

"Say a word! Girl, you don't do anything but say words. You'd like to boss the whole show if I'd let you. When you marry, yore husband will certainly be the worst henpecked man alive."

"It's the voice of my Uncle-Dad," the girl announced as though reflecting aloud, "but it's the face of Black Tom I see whispering in his ear."

"Tom has the right of it sometimes. You sure are mighty interferin'. I've spoiled you, an' you take advantage of it. I won't have it. Ride on the rope an' see where it gets you."

With which Hughes Henry turned on his heel and clamped out of the room and downstairs.

A little embarrassed, Jim spoke regretfully to the girl: "I don't want you an' yore uncle having trouble because of me. Let him have his way. It's all right."

Pattie smiled, her brown eyes sparkling to mirth that broke the lines of her face as ripples do the surface of a sunny lake. "We're not having trouble—an' we won't. He'd do anything for me—anything in the world he thought right. So would I for him, pretty nearly. But we've got to blow off steam once in a while. Don't you worry!"

"We-ll," agreed Jim doubtfully.

"Now I'll pull the blind down an' leave you to sleep," she said.

She moved about the room adjusting the window screen and the few things on the chair beside the bed that she thought he might want.

"If you need me, ring this bell," she told him.

Jim nodded, smiling at her. Ever since he had been a little boy he had been an orphan, practically, and he enjoyed having her mother him more than he could have told.

She left the room and half closed the door behind her.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE INVALID

JIM met Bob Henry later in the day. The boy tiptoed into the room to get some cartridges, but as he turned from the table he saw that Turner was not asleep.

"Didn't want to waken you," he explained with boyish embarrassment. "How are things comin'?"

"I'm doing fine," Jim answered.

"Good. Lucky they didn't shoot you up worse."

"Yes."

Neither of them had any more to say, but Bob did not know how to get out of the room gracefully. He stood there awkwardly, as though waiting for his cue to leave. Young Henry was a good-looking lad, straight and slender, with very attractive blue eyes, long and thickly lashed. If it had not been for a certain manly vigour he would have been a pretty boy. Jim could see instantly a resemblance to his sister, one which did not seem to depend on similarity of feature, but rather on expression and a look of spirited vividness common to both.

A light step sounded on the stairs, and Pattie came into the room.

"Did you wake him, Bob?" she asked accusingly, the nurse in her to the fore.

"I don't reckon I did." Bob turned to the man on the bed. "Did I?"

"No. And if you had it wouldn't have mattered. I

musta slept two-three hours. I'm feeling fine." He grinned at Pattie by way of confirmation.

She let the light in through the window. "I think you *are* better," she told him. "Does yore leg hurt much?"

"No-o. Oncet in a while it sends a li'l message up to me to kinda jog my mind." He looked at the bandaged limb proudly. "You sure enough did a right good job."

"Pat's some doctor," her brother contributed. "Oncet when Uncle Hughes got typhoid drinkin' water from a ditch down in Old Mex, she fetched him through fine. Doc East said one o' these fancy brand nurses from a hospital couldn't 'a' done any better."

"I believe him," Jim agreed. "I never saw the beat of it, the way she did; like as if she'd been used to takin' care of maverick cow-punchers all her life. Yes, I certainly was lucky. If I'd played out somewheres in the hills in a country filled with absentees, the same as this is mostly, where would I have been at by this time? I reckon the buzzards would 'a' been pickin' my bones."

"Yes, I'm glad I heard yore gun go off when you dropped it," Pattie admitted.

"An' I'm glad it was *you* heard it. Maybe Mr. Truesdale, say, if he'd been the one to hear it, mightn't have nursed me so skillful an' fed me up with chicken broth an' custards an' propped me up so careful."

The red blood beat into Pattie's face beneath the brown tan. "The way you boys talk," she interrupted. "My gracious, I didn't do anything to shout about. But I do hope yore wound will be all right."

"It will," Jim answered confidently. "A nice li'l clean bullet hole ain't much, not in the fleshy part of the leg. An', like I been sayin', I had luck in those that befriended me."

"Well, you are entitled to some good luck after the bad luck you had, if——"

Bob stopped, embarrassed. To complete his *if* clause would not be tactful.

"If my story is true," Jim finished for him with composure. "Well, I'm still stickin' to it right persistent. You can't ever tell. Maybe I can get someone to believe me after a while."

"That's a nice thing to say," Pattie protested. "What have I been doing all this time, I'd like to know?"

"I should 'a' said someone else," Jim repented.

"I didn't say I didn't believe it," Bob objected.

Pattie laughed. "The Henry family seem hard to convince, all but one of them."

"I'm much obliged to the one that does believe me," her guest said simply. "I wish you'd known Hal. If you had, you'd know at once he couldn't be any horse thief."

"I knew at once his friend couldn't be when I saw him," she said.

"He was the whitest pal ever a man had. Hal an' me, we've bucked blizzards together an' night herded a hundred times an' broke brons an' done most everything kids do. That boy——"

Jim did not finish his sentence. He shut his lips tightly and looked away at the rim of the valley through the open window. He had not realized when he began to speak about Hal that he would break down. His throat swelled and he had to clamp his lips to prevent an audible sob. With his fingers he searched in his pocket for the envelope upon which Hal had written his last message. This he handed to Bob.

Young Henry read it, with the eager appreciation of youth. He had seen and even been a part of rough and turbulent episodes, but never before had he been brought so close to the

dramatic tragedy of death. His eyes were shining when he gave back the envelope to the boy on the bed.

"He was a sure enough man, or he wouldn't have written he hoped you'd make a getaway when—when things were breakin' the way they were for him. He'd 'a' been full up with his own troubles, an' he certainly had all that was comin' right then. Yes, sir, I'd liked to have known that boy. He'd do to ride the river with. No wonder you're proud of him."

"Now you've talked enough," Pattie told them both. "If Mr. Turner is my patient, like he claims he is, why he's gotta rest now. Afterward, in an hour or so, I'll bring up some custard if you like it." This last was spoken directly to Jim.

"Got to do like the boss says," Bob said with a grin, and he went clumping down the stairs in his tight, high-heeled boots.

"You're to sleep," Pattie told her patient with motherly severity. "I shouldn't have let you talk so long. I hope we haven't done you any harm."

"Oh, you haven't," he said eagerly.

But after she had gone, Jim did not fall asleep at once. He thought of this slim young creature who had been a ministering angel to him, of the swiftness with which her small feet went out to meet life, of that fine flashing look of trust her eyes held. Never had he met anyone like her, at once so shy and yet so sure, so matter of fact in her tenderness, with such largesse of kindness in her smile and in her quick eyes.

When he slept he dreamed of her, and in his dreams she was somehow both a girl and mother, the two inextricably woven into her being. He did not know that all good women, and most of those not held so good in the eyes of the world, have

in them that blend of the maternal and the adolescent. He knew only that she was the most wonderful person he had ever known.

But Jim could scarcely remember his own mother, and he had not met any women since to know them at all well.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A FUGITIVE MEMORY

**I**T WAS two or three days later that Jim made a suggestion to his nurse. "I've always waited till I should get stove up to educate myself. Never found time before. Don't you reckon I'd better read some books whilst I'm lying around? You were tellin' about that old man who taught you, how he had so many books. Mebbe he'd lend me the loan of some."

"Homer Tedrow! Of course he would. He'd be glad to. Homer's kinda funny about books—acts as though they were folks and tells you how he wants you to meet this friend and that friend, 'Jane Eyre' or 'Harry Lorrequer' or Carlyle or someone. They say he's queer in the head, but he isn't. It's just his way. He says books are a lot better worth knowing than most people. He loans us lots of his books. I'll have Bob ride over and get you some."

Bob was away from home, but when he returned his sister hailed him before he had unsaddled. He nodded assent to her request and cantered down the road. Half an hour later he came back carrying half a dozen volumes. Pattie was in the kitchen.

"Black Tom rode up while I was there," he told her.

She stopped beating eggs to look at her brother indignantly. "Why can't he leave Sue alone? I hate that man."

"Kinda funny," Bob admitted. "I never saw him look at a woman before. He don't act like he cares anything

about Sue, except to bully her. I don't believe he does either."

"But he's made up his mind to marry her. I wonder why. Maybe he's too high and mighty to let anyone see he really likes her."

"Well, I reckon she won't have to marry him if she don't want to," the boy said by way of dismissing the subject. "It's a free country."

"Not when you're on Black Tom's range, it isn't. It's a shame, a downright crime, but if he wants to marry Sue, he'll do it. Nobody will interfere, and she can't help herself." Pattie's voice rang indignantly.

"She's a girl. He can't do a thing to her if she says she won't and stands pat. Not a thing."

"What's the use of talking that way, Bob? She can't get away from it. You know how kinda timid she is, and if she marries him he'll just bully her to death. What books did you bring back with you?"

"Some novels, an' a history ook, an' a life of some fellow who explored Africa."

"David Livingstone, maybe."

"Rung the bell the first shot," he told her, after glancing at the title of the book.

Bob took the books up to the boy lying on the bed and Jim looked them over. He settled down to the life of Livingstone.

After a couple of hours, he grew tired of reading and began to browse through the other volumes. He noticed that in each case the fly leaf of the book had either been torn out or the name of the owner so carefully inked over that it could not possibly be deciphered. It occurred to Jim that very likely the real name of the nester was not Homer Tedrow, that he had discarded this when he buried himself with his shat-



tered life in Lost Park. Many men who came to the Western frontier preferred, for one reason or another, a different name from the one they had been known by in other states. Most of them had good reasons for the change, reasons that had to do with an escape from the long arm of the law, and it was not considered good form to ask questions as to a man's former habitat or the causes for leaving it. His past was his own, a closed chapter.

And then, thumbing carelessly the pages of an old history of England, Jim came upon something which gave him a curious thrill. It was a name and an address on an old yellowed envelope.

Mr. Edward Sloan  
Gold Hill  
Arizona

Sloan! Gold Hill! The names gave to him an odd excitement, one which he could not in the least understand. Vaguely they seemed familiar to him, as though they had come to him through some mist out of his shadowy past. He could not understand why the words stirred in him an emotion which had no relation to any meaning read in them by his mind. It was as though his memory automatically were reaching out for data lost in a penumbra of fog too remote and too dense to be penetrated. His impressions were beyond understanding. He could find no cause for the quickening of blood that had stirred within him, no logical excuse for it.

His earliest memories were disjointed ones. Little scenes stood out like mountain peaks in a sea of floating clouds hung low. He saw a woman, very pretty and very merry, leaning over his crib and nuzzling his throat with kisses; then the en-

trance of a man into the room and the instant freezing of the laughter which had lit her face. He saw her again, her face sunken and colourless. The same man was in the room, and he was jeering at her weakness brutally and callously. The woman was his mother, the man his father. He rushed at the man in childish fury, kicking and striking with all his force. A moment later, the man was cutting his tender flesh with a buggy whip while his mother clung to the man's arm and pleaded for mercy.

Another picture! He was alone with the man, travelling about the country with him, standing against the wall while knives were flung above and below his outstretched arms and close to his slim body. There was still a scar in the flesh of one forearm where a knife had come too close. Custer Turner had been drinking too much. He often did. This must have been after the death of his mother, Jim figured, for before that he dimly recalled that she had been the target of the knife-throwing exhibitions. He had been a fine-looking man, Custer Turner. So Jim had heard women say. He stood over six feet, broad-shouldered, with black hair falling over the collar of his leather coat. An easy swinging carriage, a bluff and hearty manner, unlimited confidence, a suave courtesy—except to the woman he had harried to her grave and the little boy whom he bullied till the youngster dreaded the sight of him. Having no conscience and no modesty, it was no wonder he could lure women from the humdrum monotony of their drab lives to the promise of romance he offered. There had been such women. Jim vaguely knew that, though he could recall no sharp details.

His memories were not consecutive. Another leaped to his mind. His mother was still in this picture. The three of them had arrived late at night somewhere, and Jim had ap-

parently been tossed on the bed to fall asleep. He awakened to the fag end of a quarrel, and to see the man stamp out of the house in a rage. He could see his mother's face, bruised, distorted with tears, as she flung herself down and buried her head in her hands. He remembered climbing down from the bed and running to comfort her, overwhelmed by the tragedy that had befallen her.

And again one more picture snatched out of the dim past. He was led into his mother's room. She lay, weak and spent, on a bed, and at sight of him she broke down and sobbed. Her fingers caressed his face and she cried out in a whisper, "My boy, my baby, I must leave you—alone." The heart-break in her voice he had never forgotten.

The later pictures grew more clear. He was plodding a dusty road far from town at fall of night. A wagon train caught up with him. He was given a lift, food, a blanket. This was when he was running away. That wagon train had taken him straight to the Bar X Y.

But all of this had nothing to do with Edward Sloan or Gold Hill, so far as he knew. Gold Hill was, of course, an old mining camp, now a cow town. As far as he knew, he had never been there. Nor did he know anybody named Edward Sloan. Yet these names disturbed him profoundly. If he could only pierce the veil a little further, could pick up some loose skein of recollection——

When Pattie came up with his supper tray he passed the envelope to her. "Found it in one of these books. Know who this Sloan is?" he asked.

She read the name and address. "The largest store at Gold Hill is run by a man named Sloan. I don't know about his first name. We trade there sometimes. He's the big man around there—rich and all that. Maybe the envelope just got into Homer's book by accident. Perhaps he came

from Gold Hill. It's an old envelope. You can tell that by the way it has yellowed. Gold Hill used to be a live mining camp before the boom petered out an' left it just a cow town."

"Ye-es," assented Jim. "Sounds likely enough, but——"

"But what?"

"It's funny. I've never met this Sloan or been to Gold Hill, far as I know, though I travelled around a lot when I was a little chap. But I have a feeling that, if I could only make myself remember, there is something about these names that kinda fits into something I've forgotten. I can't explain my feeling, but—well, I've never had anything take me that way before."

"That's queer, isn't it? Fits in how?" It was of her eager vitality that, since she was now his friend, she was interested in whatever interested him.

"I don't know. That's what's so queer—Sloan! Doesn't mean a thing to me. I might 'a' been in Gold Hill once. My father had one of these street fake medicine shows—card tricks, knife-throwing, banjo, that sort of thing. We moved from town to town. Like enough we were sometime at Gold Hill. But what's the use of makin' so much of it? Maybe it is just a notion, anyhow. I like this David Livingstone. He was some man. I'll say that, if he was a parson."

"Yes," she agreed, "his life is fascinating. Perhaps it's because he's so different from the rest of us. We all want to get something for ourselves—have good times or make money, or do this or that. But he always wanted to do things for others. It couldn't have been much fun for him, down in Africa, so far from his friends and other white people."

"No, I reckon not. Still, he likely had a good time in that wild country when there was so much game. I'd kinda like to go lion hunting."

"Do you care for apple turnovers? I've got one for you between these hot plates."

He said he did, and he proved it later by eating the last crumb of this one, having previously disposed of several biscuits, a steak, and some mashed potatoes with gravy.

Decidedly, he was getting better.

## CHAPTER IX

### A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

AIDED by a stick, Jim limped down to the sunny porch accompanied by Pattie with pillows, books, and other impedimenta designed for his comfort. Occasionally, the young man was embarrassed by her care for him. It did not seem quite manly to have a girl making things easy for him in this peculiarly feminine way. More than once he explained to her that he was doing "fine," that she didn't need to bother about him any more. None the less, she quietly continued to see that he had the best the ranch afforded. Now she arranged an armchair with another straightbacked one upon which to put his feet.

He sat down, grinning to cover his sense that she was quite unnecessarily spoiling him. "You're too darned good to me," he said.

Pattie blushed. She was subject to shyness whenever she became self-conscious. This in spite of the fact that she was as often as direct, as companionable as a boy. It did not embarrass her in the least to serve him, but any reference to the fact was likely to do so.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"*Henry Esmond*. Say, that Beatrice girl is some li'l' go-getter."

"I don't like her. You won't either when you've finished reading the book."

"I don't know as I like her either, but she'd be right interestin', don't you reckon?"

She stuck to her guns. "I'd hate to be around anyone like that. She was a selfish little vixen. I don't know why it is that men always stand up for women like that."

"Do they?" Jim made a confession. "Fact is, I don't know a thing about women. I've always lived with men. You're the first girl I ever really talked with. I'd 'a' been scared of you if I'd had a chance."

"How do you mean—if you'd had a chance?"

"Why, if I'd had a knockdown to you, an' had had to say, 'Pleased to meet you, ma'am.' But things happened so fast with me fainting an' you nursing me that I didn't have time to think about how blamed bashful I am."

"Are you really?" She flashed to a swift smile. "I'm glad to hear it, because I'm just awful shy when I meet new people. Here come Bob an' Uncle Hughes from the corral."

Hughes Henry frowned as he approached the house. The solicitude of his niece for their guest annoyed him, yet he would have been greatly disturbed if she had been lacking in hospitality. He wanted her to treat this young fellow well as long as he was their guest, and yet somehow he resented it. Irritably he felt that Turner, if that was what he called himself, had not played fair with him. Therefore he would have liked Pattie to be formally kind and stop there. But it was quite evident that her kindness was of the spirit and not of the letter. She liked having him about the place, and she believed the fool story he stuck to about swapping horses with the real thief. In a way he did not blame her. The fellow looked like a decent man, and probably she was lonesome for company up here.

Hughes had intended to pass inside without a word, but his sense of hospitality would not permit it. He had not seen his



guest since the day of his arrival and he could not totally ignore him. So he stopped on the porch to grunt out a greeting.

"Well, how's the leg comin'?"

"Fine! Fine as the wheat! In two-three days now I'll be able to hit the trail," Jim said. He felt it incumbent on him to assure his host that he would burden him no longer than necessary.

"You will not," denied Pattie bluntly. "That long trip! It'll be ten days yet anyhow." She turned eagerly to her uncle. "He seems to think he's eatin' us out of house and home."

Hughes realized that the unscrupulous little scamp was forcing his hand, yet he heard himself saying brusquely, with no previous intention of so committing himself, "Nothing to that. I reckon we'll not miss what you eat, boy, an' you can't go till you're fit to travel. 'S a long ride to the Bar X Y."

He strode past, but at the door he stopped a moment, to call back gruffly to his niece, "Wanta see you a minute, Pat."

Pattie followed him into the living room, known in the family as "the front room," since the other term was not yet in common use.

Hughes was spilling tobacco from a pouch into a pipe through his cupped hand. He tamped this down and lit up while she waited demurely. The girl knew he wanted to scold her, and she had no intention of losing a tactical advantage by asking what he wished with her. Abruptly he broke out:

"What's yore idea, Pat, in drivin' me to tell this fellow he's welcome? Hmp! Far as I'm concerned he's welcome as a frost in June. He's forced on us, looks like, but I ain't aimin' to make a pet of him. If that's yore notion——"

Pattie realized that her uncle was taking out on her the reaction against his own weakness as a host. Therefore she answered mildly:

"I thought we might as well be civil since he is here. He'll be gone in a few days. I don't want him to think we're all savages in Lost Park, an' I don't want him to say that while he lay sick at Hughes Henry's he wasn't treated right, no matter whether you like him or don't."

"That's all right, too," he conceded. "But he might as well know I stand pat right where I did. Till he comes clean, the less I have to do with him the better it suits me."

Pattie gave him one of her swift friendly smiles. She might have asked him if that was why he had been urging his guest not to hurry away. But she knew that would only irritate him uselessly.

"No use going into that, Uncle Hughes," she said. "You know what I think, and I know what you think, so——"

"Hold yore horses, miss," he interrupted. "What I want to tell you is that we don't know this fellow, where he comes from, or who he is. He's no friend of ours. I don't see the need of you gettin' so thick with him. An' I won't have it. Understand?"

The colour burned into her brown cheeks. Her eyes flashed a challenge.

"What do you mean, thick with him?"

Hughes wished he had not put it quite that way. He had not meant to alarm her shy wild pride. It was not his custom to attempt to control her conduct. In fact, he did not think it necessary.

"You know what I mean," he said, not caring to abandon his position ignominiously.

"I—I think it's hateful of you," she broke out. "Just because I'm decent to him. All right. Look after him your-

self. I'm through. I quit right now. You and Bob can feed him and look after him."

The hot tears were in her eyes. With a little sob she turned and ran swiftly upstairs to her room.

Hughes followed her ruefully. He tried the handle of her door, but the bolt had been driven into its socket. He called gently to her, but she did not answer. Presently, after knocking and calling again, he clumped downstairs reluctantly. He had offended her self-respect and he was ashamed of himself. She probably thought he meant that she was throwing herself at the fellow's head. Of course, he had not meant that at all. Well, women were kittle-cattle, as his old Scotch father used to say. You never knew how they would take anything. Far as that went, there was no good reason why he shouldn't warn her against getting interested in this fellow. He was practically her father. It was his business to look out for her.

All of which bolstering of his position meant nothing at all except as self-justification. He knew he would eat humble pie when she let him make it up with her.

## CHAPTER X

"I'LL BE WAITIN' AT THE GATE WHEN YOU COME"

**H**UGHES HENRY ate his humble pie a couple of hours later. He explained at some length what he had not meant by his indiscreet warning, and he succeeded in placating her resentment.

But her manner toward their guest changed. The spontaneous friendliness and camaraderie were less in evidence. They were restrained by a touch of self-consciousness which brought reserve. She did not laugh and chat with him as much as she had. She did not scold him or mother him or argue with him.

He noticed it, and he wondered if he had offended her. It disturbed him, for her friendship meant a great deal to his starved heart. This was on his mind next day as he sat on the porch watching Bob clean a rifle. He had half a mind to ask the boy if he had in any way been to blame. Perhaps Pattie might have spoken of it to her brother.

While he hesitated, she came to the porch to ask Bob what he had done with the scissors he had been using.

At the same moment, a man rode up to the stable and dismounted. He turned his horse into the corral and moved toward the house.

Pattie was watching him. "Sam Marshall," she said.

"Yep," her brother agreed.

Jim glanced quickly at the girl. He thought he had read in her voice annoyance. He remembered that she had spoken

of him as a bad man, comparing him with her uncle whom she had classified as good. But there was now some flare of resentment in her eyes, a stiffening of her slender body, that seemed to suggest a distaste for the man, personal rather than general.

The young fellow’s eyes went back to the approaching figure. It was a heavy-set one, not above medium height, and it moved with the swaggering bow-legged roll peculiar to some cow-punchers when on foot. As it moved nearer, there came to him at first the leap of doubt, then a surge of blood which meant certainty.

This man was the one who had called himself Buck Stone, the one who had trapped Hal to his death.

Blind rage raced through the boy’s veins with the effect of a poison. Never before had he known such a feeling, so passionate and bitter and all-engulfing. It was like a great wave which swept his feet from under him and left him helpless. He knew that he turned pale as the reaction of the shock sent the blood from face and lips.

“What’s the matter?” asked Pattie, staring at him.

He did not answer. His eyes, held as though under some fascination, did not for an instant lift from the approaching figure. There was in them such a blaze of concentrated hatred as she had never seen before.

The approaching man swept off his hat and lifted his voice in a manner meant to be gay and hearty, but the gaiety was heavy, and the heartiness lacked convincing sincerity. It was as though for some purpose of his own he had set himself to play a part for which he was not fitted. What that part was Jim did not know, but he was to learn later. Marshall realized that the Henrys counted for more in the scheme of things at Lost Park than he did. That was one reason for ingratiating himself with them. But he had a more particu-

lar one. He aspired to marriage with Hughes Henry's niece.

"'Lo, Sam," Bob called back carelessly. "Fine as the wheat."

Pattie said nothing. Her attention was absorbed wholly by the change which had come over their guest. Her blood beat fast. She knew certainly, apprehensively, that drama, and perhaps tragedy, was at hand.

The man whom Bob had called Sam opened his mouth in a grin to speak to the girl, but before he had spoken a word, the grin faded from his face, driven away by incredulous amazement. He stared at Turner, and as he did so his fishy eyes turned bleak. The assumption of hearty good-will had been torn from the face like a mask.

Bob, too, was now aware of something unusual in the situation. He looked first at one and then at the other of these men whose eyes had become deadly weapons.

"'S matter?" he asked.

Neither of them answered. Each was concerned wholly with the other. It was Pattie who flung into words the explanation of this tensity.

"The scar-faced man," she said, the words surprised out of her in a whisper. And with her discovery and the accompanying sense of danger, she added in a low voice to her brother, "Bring Uncle Hughes!"

Sam Marshall, alias Buck Stone, paid not the least notice to what she said. His eyes, his crouched attention, were for the young fellow in the chair and for no other. He read the challenge of those steely gray eyes, and he gathered himself to meet it. The bad man had given him little consideration at their former meeting. He was a fool boy to be tricked. That was all. But now he made no such mistake. He read danger in the steadiness of his dark gaze, and the impression of a spirit resolute and dangerous was not lessened by the

salient chin, the straight, well-defined nose, and the firm mouth.

“What you doin’ here?” demanded Marshall harshly, almost with a snarl.

That question young Turner did not answer. His response went straight to the issue, as he saw it.

“You murderer.”

Pattie’s voice lifted in a cry. Quickly she stepped—leaped were a better word for that plunging motion of her slender young body—in front of the wounded lad. For Marshall had whipped out a .44 and was levelling it at the young man in the chair.

“Don’t!” she screamed.

“Get outa the way, girl,” ordered the ruffian. “Hear what he called me? Get away an’ leave me at him!”

“No—no!” she cried, fear filled. “Put away that gun.”

Marshall moved forward slowly, circling a little to get at his prey. He was like a great cat in his crouched intentness, a tiger ready for the leap.

A swift, heavy step sounded on the porch and a sharp voice lifted in command:

“Don’t you, Sam!”

Hughes Henry passed down the porch steps straight to the ferocious ruffian.

Marshall stopped, the weapon close to his side, the barrel still lifted. “Hear what he called me, Hughes?”

“’S no matter. Put up yore gun, Sam. I’m surprised at you. This boy’s stayin’ with me.”

“Stayin’ with you, is he? Since wnen has the horse thief been yore friend?”

“I didn’t say he was my friend. I said he was stayin’ here. Put up yore gun, like I told you, Sam.”

“He’s a damned spy.”



"May be so. We'll 'tend to that later."

Henry spoke quietly, but Sam Marshall knew that quietness. He still blustered, but the danger of a sudden explosion of his rage was past. He pushed the .44 back into its holster and spoke sulkily:

"Better let me bump him off, Hughes. You sure better."

"No, listen."

"I'm listenin'. But get me right. No damned horse thief can call me a murderer and get away with it."

Jim spoke again, and his voice was bitter with contemptuous hatred: "I called him a murderer. He is. When he sold my friend that horse because the posse was crowdin' him, he put a rope round Hal's neck. It was a cowardly murder, an' some day I'll sure kill the yellow wolf that did it, sure as I'm a foot high—unless he gets me first."

"He's a liar," screamed Marshall. "You ain't believin' this horse thief, are you? Lemme git him right now, Hughes."

Henry began to see the light. "Keep yore shirt on, Sam," he said warningly. Then, turning to his guest, "You claim this is the man who traded yore friend the stolen horse?"

Jim answered the question put to him by Hughes: "He's the man. Didn't I tell you his face was scarred?"

"That's what he said, Uncle. He described Sam Marshall exactly," Pattie cried. "And how did Sam know about him if the story isn't true?"

"Tryin' to lay it on me, eh?" blustered Marshall: "I met him outside, him an' another fellow ridin' hell-for-leather to make a getaway. They wanted to get into the park here, pulled a cock-an'-bull story about a bet down at their ranch. Right off I figured 'em for horse thieves. Rung the bell on the birds first crack. I told 'em nothing doing on this gettin' into the park stuff, far as I was concerned, anyways. Then I left 'em. The posse must 'a' been right on their tails.

They nabbed the other fellow an’ strung him up. This one, I reckon, give ’em the slip. How he got into the park beats me. But you got no call to protect him, Hughes.”

“My business, Sam. Maybe you’ll let me decide that,” the rancher said curtly. He was not satisfied with Marshall’s explanation, and if he decided the man had done the thing of which the boy accused him, he would have nothing but contempt for him.

“I don’t believe a word you say, Sam Marshall,” Pattie broke in. “You stole the horse yourself. You know you did.”

“Be still, Pat,” her uncle commanded. He turned to Marshall. “I’ll say this, Sam. If you stole that horse and then sawed it off on that boy because a posse was crowdin’ you, why you’d better not let me find it out. Because I’d have to ask you to leave the park an’ not come back. We’ll stand so much here an’ no more. Mind, I don’t say you did it. I say, if you did.”

“I swear to God, Hughes——”

“That’ll do.” Hughes included Turner in his next remarks. “It’s the word of one of you against the other, far as I can see. I’m not deciding which of you is a liar and a thief. At a proper time, you can settle yore own differences. But not here. Understand that, Sam. You, too, Turner, if that’s what you call yourself. I’ll have no gun plays here. The first one of you that forgets that will bite off more’n he can chew in the way of trouble. What I say goes. See?”

Neither the young man in the chair nor the ruffian below answered. They still glared at each other, hate smouldering in their eyes.

“So that’s settled,” Henry continued, assuming the silence to be consent. “Now, if you rode over to see me, Sam, we’ll drift over to the corral an’ talk over yore business.”

Marshall's anger burst through the dam of silence built to control it.

"One of these days I'll get you right, young fellow," he told Turner.

"I'll be waitin' at the gate for you when you come," the other answered grimly.

"Soon," boasted Marshall.

"Can't be too soon to suit me."

Hughes Henry laid a hand on Marshall's shoulder. "Come on, Sam," he said quietly.

With a curse the ruffian turned and joined the ranchman, spurs jingling as he slouched away. Even then, his back turned toward them, Pattie found the man's manner a sinister and cruel threat. His lurching shadow bulked grotesquely in the sunshine, an evil and shapeless thing, like some sprawling and distorted monster far removed from human kind.

She shuddered. If souls take shape and form, his must be a horribly misshapen thing, she thought.

Her young life had been lived in the open, among clean things, warmed by sunlight to normal growth. Never before had she met a man wholly bad. But some instinct in her, the swift sure instinct of the discerning sex, told her that Sam Marshall was a uniquely evil product. She had no evidence to prove this. None the less, she was assured of its truth.

With an effort, she brought her attention back to her guest. His eyes were following the progress of the man he hated. It was amazing to her that a boy like Jim Turner, a clean, warm-hearted lad, with all the naïve faith of youth, should be so possessed by a great and destructive hate which could so instantly obliterate gaiety and good-will.

"Why did you talk thataway to him?" the girl reproved. "An' you without a gun to defend yourself."

He turned on her eyes still bleak and chill. "I served

notice on him. Why not? I aim to kill him if I can. The way I look at it, he killed Hal Shoreham, an’ in a way that no killer who claimed to be a man would ’a’ done. He’s nothing but a yellow wolf, and that’s how I aim to treat him when I get a chanct. It’ll be him or me, one of these days. Soon, too, like he said.”

It made her cold to hear that even voice of deadly hate. “You shouldn’t be so—so revengeful,” she told him. “It’s unchristian. I’m not speaking for him. He don’t matter. But you—if you think such feelings, it’ll do you a hurt.”

He looked at her. Then he looked away without answering. This was one matter upon which he did not care for her opinion.

## CHAPTER XI

### PATTIE BREAKS A CUP

HUGHES HENRY jotted down in a notebook some purchases to be made when he went to town, as he intended to do to-day. The list was already a long one, added to from day to day as the need for this or that article had been apparent. It already included horseshoes, nails, salt, a pair of half soles, tea kettle, sugar, buggy shaft, axle grease, cartridges, powder, stirrup leather, four cups and saucers, and corn meal. To these he now added:

Pipe  
Bull Durham  
matches.

His niece had been clearing the table after supper. While she worked, she hummed cheerfully a little song—

“Every daisy in the dell  
Knows my story,  
Knows it well,”

interrupting it when other matter occupied her mind.

“Didn’t I tell you he was all right?” she at last burst forth with triumph.

Her uncle tried to recollect what else it was he had made a mental note of to put upon his list, but this he found himself unable to do with a divided mind.

“Doggone it, what was it I figured I’d have to get? I was

in the stable when I thought of it. . . . You mean this Turner boy?"

"Yes. I knew it all the time."

"I heard you say so," he agreed.

"Now you see I was right, don't you?"

"I've got his word for it, if that's what you mean," Hughes told her drily. "But then I had that before. . . . A new rope for Bob. That's what it was."

Pattie was the slightest bit annoyed at her uncle's perversity. She jammed a cup into another so hard that she broke one and the handle off the other.

"I'm changin' this from four to six cups an' saucers," Hughes told her.

Pattie laughed. "I wonder what becomes of all the extra saucers in the world. It's always the cups that break."

"When I was a boy, up in Southern Colorado, I usta wonder what became of all the vests. We cow-punchers would go in an' buy a new suit an' leave the vest in the store. No use for it. Old Sorenson had hundreds on his shelves, till he took to givin' them away to the Utes. I reckon you can still see some of them old bucks wearin' an odd vest."

"It's yore own fault, Uncle Hughes, that these two cups are broken. I guess it's true that there are none so blind as those who won't see. If you'd had a look at that boy's face when he first caught sight of Sam——"

"What would it have told me? Maybe only that he figured he'd better get the jump on Sam an' get his word in first. You're prejudiced, Pat. You don't like Sam an' you do like the boy. Now, ain't that a fact?"

Beneath the tan of her skin a flush ran, rich and colourful, flooding with a warm glow the smooth brown cheeks.

"You don't like Sam yourself, do you?" she asked. "You don't trust him."

"No, I don't, but——"

"Of course you don't. You know he is tricky and cruel and false. I'm not prejudiced because I see that Sam is bad through and through and that this boy is decent and honest. I don't like him particularly, but I'd take his word any day in the week a thousand times before I would Sam Marshall's."

"You don't know what he's like."

"I do, too, and anyhow, I know what Sam is like." Pattie came to another aspect of the matter. "He wants his gun back. He ought to have it, too. Sam might come back when you're away. We can't leave him defenceless."

Hughes gave this brief consideration. "That's reasonable enough. The gun's over there in that drawer. You can give it to him. But I don't expect him to use it unless he's attacked—not in the park, anyhow. If he does, I'll sure be in his wool. You can tell him that. I won't have him makin' us a convenience in his private feud."

"Yes," Pattie agreed. "That's fair."

Hughes took with him a pack animal and would not be back for a couple of days. His last words before leaving were a warning to Bob.

"I don't reckon Sam Marshall will bother you any. I told him what's what, mighty plain. But if he comes around an' raises a rookus, you see that Pat keeps outa it. An' you stay out yore own self, boy. This ain't yore fight. It's between Sam an' Turner."

Pattie told Jim what her uncle had said, at the same time restoring his gun to him. "You're to promise not to use it in the park unless you are attacked. Uncle Hughes wants that understood. And I think it's fair. Don't you? He's not in this quarrel, and you're not to drag him in. So, while you're at his house, you're to be peaceable."

"Fair enough," Jim agreed. "I'll not be the one to start



burnin' powder. If we get to foggin' up the air whilst I'm here, it will be because Marshall starts something. That's a promise, ma'am."

"Probably you'll feel better now you have yore friend Colt close to you," Bob said, grinning.

"You can cut out that 'probably.' I sure do feel a lot safer. I didn't feel good in my gizzards while that Marshall was flourishing his gun so crazy to get at me. If it hadn't been for yore family, I would have been a goner for fair."

"Why were you so foolish?" demanded Pattie. "It wasn't good sense to talk that way to him. An' you unarmed."

"I couldn't seem to help myself," he admitted ruefully. "Soon as I recognized him, I went wild. He killed Hal just as much as though he'd put a bullet in his head."

"Yes, but—you must try to have some sense," she admonished with a friendly smile. "If Uncle Hughes hadn't been here, Sam would have shot you sure. He's a bad man."

"I reckon he would," the young man admitted. "It was right good of him to butt in—an' you, too."

Jim finished the sentence weakly. He wanted to tell her all the gratitude that was in his heart. But he could not. The intensity of his feeling made him awkward, held him dumb. She had risked her life to save him. How could he put his emotional reaction into mere words? He did not trust himself to speak about it. He could not say, "I'm much obliged," as though someone had passed him the salt. And if he said more——

For it was not to Hughes Henry that his deep gratitude welled up. Not knowing women at all, never a recipient of their love and care and generosity, he was the more sensitive to all the influences that radiated from the presence of this charming young creature. She seemed to him wholly wonderful and desirable, at times a shy and wild child, at times a

little mother full of proprietary scoldings, but always a vital personality wholly new in his experience.

She could do no wrong in his eyes. He justified her first friendliness, the withdrawal of her companionship, and now the renewal of it, even though he couldn't understand the reasons for it. But at the same time he was a little ashamed to be the object of her solicitude. It offended his manhood by seeming to imply his need of it. After all, he was full grown, he told himself severely, and he ought not to be tickled to be treated like a kid.

Yet undeniably he wanted her to mother him.

## CHAPTER XII

### A TOBACCO STAIN

IT WAS three days later that Pattie's brother Bob rode up to the house toward evening. He had been combing some wooden draws on the lookout for strays, and he had come on something that had sent him riding home fast with excitement buzzing in him. Nevertheless, since he was a boy and did not like to show it, he assumed a manner of debonaire carelessness when he swung down from the saddle and let out a "Hi-yi-yippy-yi" to draw Pattie and his uncle to the porch.

Jim Turner had put down his book and now opened conversation with him. "Anything new, son?"

The boy's enthusiasm broke through. "You bet there is. Wait till Uncle Hughes comes out."

"He's not here. Rode away a while ago."

Pattie came to the door. "'Lo, Bob! That yore foghorn I heard?" she asked.

"Y'betcha! Supper 'most ready? I'm starved.

"No news," she said promptly. "You always are."

"I could eat a leather mail sack if it was stewed. How soon supper?"

"When Uncle Hughes comes back."

"Say," he broke out, unable to restrain himself longer, "what kind of a horse was it yore friend traded to Sam Marshall?"

Jim described the animal. "Sorrel. Good size. Splash

of white on the nose. Left hind leg has a white stocking. Why—you seen it?"

"By jiminy, it's the same one," Bob exclaimed, slapping with a quirt his shiny leather chaps.

"What do you mean?" his sister cried.

"I was comin' down through that heavy timber back of Powder Gulch, kinda half asleep I reckon, when Pete shied at something. It was a dead horse. I got off to have a look-see. It was a sorrel, like you say, with a white stocking an' a white splash below the forehead. The brand was the Bar X Y."

"Hal bought it from the old man," Jim explained. "But what I'm wonderin' is how come it there dead."

"It had been shot, right between the eyes. An' so close that the hairs were powder marked."

Pattie's eyes sparkled with excitement. "But who shot it? I don't understand."

"Neither did I at first, but I got to figurin' it out. I ain't sure yet, but I got a guess comin' all right."

Jim laughed grimly. "So have I."

"But who—Sam Marshall?" she asked.

"Only two people could 'a' been interested in it. I'm one. Marshall is the other. You pays yore money an' you takes yore choice."

"But why—why did he do it?" the girl asked, making her choice instantly.

"He probably did it after we had our li'l' rookus the other day. You see he had to get rid of the horse so I couldn't bring evidence to back my story about Hal's trade with him. The Bar X Y brand would have given him away. If it had been seen at his place, he couldn't have explained why it was there—not satisfactorily, anyhow. So he got rid of it. Now he's sittin' pretty. He can claim I killed the sorrel, in case the question is ever raised."

"But he didn't need to kill it. He could have taken it into the hills an' turned it loose."

"So he could. But he didn't want to go too far with it for fear of being seen. Likely he did the job at night. Besides, he'd been feedin' the horse. How could he tell it wouldn't come driftin' back again to make him trouble? No, he figured on playin' safe, an' he did, too."

But Bob had more information. He had left it to the last for dramatic effect.

"In a pig's eye, he could. Mr. Horse Trader made one li'l mistake."

Pattie watched her brother breathlessly, lips parted. Jim, too, was all attention.

"He left his name written there," the boy continued.

"His name!" Pattie repeated. "Written where?"

"On a rock."

"But—what would he do that for?" she wanted to know.

Jim explained in part, though he did not understand at all fully himself. "Bob means he left something that gave him away. Maybe his knife—or a letter."

"You're warm, but you ain't anyways hot," Bob said triumphantly. "Sam wouldn't do that. He's too smart for that."

"Then what did he leave?" Pattie asked impatiently.

"You know that trick he's got of spittin' tobacco juice on flat rocks or fence posts or anywhere the splash shows up good. He does it so much I don't reckon he knows when he does do it. It's just as natural to him as breathin', just to squirt the juice out at any plain mark. Well, about ten feet from where that horse lay three flat rocks are spattered with tobacco juice."

"That proves who did it," Pattie cried eagerly. "Of

course, I knew all the time. But you'll have to take Uncle Hughes up there an' show him. He can't explain that away."

"He won't want to explain it away," Bob said loyally. "All he wants is to make sure. You got no right to blame him for that."

"I don't blame him," Jim put in. "I might 'a' been lying like he thought. How could he tell?" The young man gave Bob a complimentary smile. "You keep yore eyes open, young fellow. I'll say that for you."

"Sho! I couldn't 'a' missed it," the lad demurred modestly, but none the less he was pleased. "Still, it is kinda funny Sam would give himself away thataway when he had been so careful to destroy the evidence against him. Mighty careless, seems like."

"It's just the one kind of mistake he couldn't guard against. Habits get to be unconscious, I reckon. He was so used to squirtin' tobacco that he didn't see those stains at all. It was the same as if they hadn't been there at all to him. A while ago I was readin' one of these detective articles, an' it said that crooks most always left some evidence. Question is whether the officers are smart enough to pick it up when it's right before their eyes. The writin' fellow explained that criminals can't remember everything. Seems to me what a fellow would be most likely to forget would be some habit that had become second nature, as the saying is."

"That's it, Jim," Pattie corroborated. "Probably he doesn't even know that he was chewing tobacco at all."

"I came back past Nick South's. Sam was there. He stopped me an' pulled a long story about how sorry he was Uncle Hughes was gettin' off on his left foot by keepin' Jim here. I stuck my tongue in my cheek an' let him talk."

"You didn't tell him about the dead horse?"

"No, I figured I'd put that up to Uncle Hughes. He'll know what he wants to do about it. He's boss of this rodeo."

"Good," commented Jim.

"Afterward, when he didn't get any change outa me one way or the other, he kinda rode me—talked rough about folks breakin' away from old friends an' throwin' them down an' how Lost Park would be surprised at what Uncle Hughes was doing, harbourin' a fellow who was probably a spy come in here to make trouble."

"He's a nice one to talk," Pattie cried indignantly. "He'd sell out his own mother."

"I told him I reckoned Uncle Hughes knew his own business an' if he needed advice from him he'd probably come an' ask for it."

"Good for you, Bob," his sister approved, clapping her hands.

"He drew in his horns some then; said he wasn't going on the prod or anything like that, an' of course he had a mighty high opinion of Uncle Hughes an' all of us, an' anyhow he was only speakin' as a friend."

"Was that all?" Pattie asked.

"About all. He made his brags that he would get Jim here yet, soon as he got a good chance."

"He needn't worry. He'll get the chance," Jim said quietly.

"I got a notion he's workin' up a feelin' against you an' us, too. It kinda made me mad, so I told him where to get off. I said Uncle Hughes had told him what he'd expect in regard to that, an' that if he had any complaint to make, why I reckoned Uncle would accommodate him with any necessary explanations any time he wanted to ride over an' ask for them."



Jim looked grave. "I don't want to make trouble for any of you after all yore kindness. Wish I was ready to travel now. I'd get out."

"Don't worry about us," Bob said proudly. "We don't have to ask Sam Marshall whether we can or can't do this or that."

None the less, Jim was disturbed. "I know; still——"

"You can leave when you're well enough to travel. Till then, we'll not worry about it," Pattie said. "The sun's down. Don't you think it's time to go into the house?"

"You're the doctor," Jim said. "Any time you say."

Hughes Henry returned an hour later, and Bob at once reported to him what he had found back of Powder Gulch. The older man took the news quietly, but he accepted the boy's report at face value. At once he went into the front room where Jim was sitting on a sofa waiting for supper.

"Well, boy, I guess I'm convinced at last," he said, offering his hand. "You mustn't hold it against me because I needed evidence. Yore story has been pulled so often by horse thieves that it's a li'l' worse than no alibi at all. But I reckon it has to be true some time, an' this is the time it was. So we'll call it quits if you say so."

"Suits me if it does you, sir, though I can't say we're quits after all you've done for me. I haven't held it against you because you didn't accept my unsupported word. An' I figured that in time you'd find out some way whether Marshall or I was the liar."

"That's all right, then. To-morrow mornin' I'll ride up with Bob to Powder Gulch and see for myself. I know it's the way the boy says but I'd like to be able to tell Sam I've seen it myself if it ever comes to a showdown between us, an' I reckon it will."

Pattie came in and announced that supper was ready.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE TEDROWS

PATTIE'S change of manner toward Jim, her renewal of friendliness, as it were, found its more or less obscure impulse in the fact that she and her uncle together had saved the young man's life when Marshall was seeking furiously to destroy it. In serving him, she had somehow bound herself not to treat him as a stranger, had formed a tie which she could not deliberately ignore. Moreover, Marshall's conduct had in a measure justified her judgment of Jim, and this had been reinforced by her brother's discovery above Powder Gulch. Her uncle now admitted this. Naturally, hers was a friendly soul, and since Hughes Henry had tacitly withdrawn his objection she let her natural kindness have its way.

It was the morning after Bob's discovery, while the boy and his uncle were riding up to Powder Gulch to verify his story, that Pattie suggested to Jim they drive up to the Tedrow place.

"I want to take these books back and get some more. If you're tired of sitting around, perhaps you'd like to go along."

"Would I?" He jumped at the chance. "Honest, I've read all the books in the world since I've been sittin' here. If I don't *do* something, I'll sure blow up."

"Yes," she derided, "you musta read all of two an' kinda looked into three-four more."

"Well, enough's aplenty. Me for the Tedrow place with you."

"I'm not sure it would be good for you—so much exertion," she teased.

"Lady, I'm going if I have to walk there," he told her.

Pattie presently drove up to the front door in an old buggy drawn by a skittish bay colt.

"Ridin' behind Kittie is an adventure," she told him. "If you're scared——"

With the aid of a stick, Jim limped down the steps to the buggy. "Of course I'm scared, but I'm going."

"Just to show how brave you are."

"And what confidence I have in my luck."

"Not to mention my driving."

"I'm gonna learn all about that in a minute or two."

"If you last that long. Steady, Kittie!"

The colt was doing a prancing little two-step which threatened at any moment to become a bolt. The girl held her with a tight rein. Jim watched his chance and pulled himself into the buggy, dropping his stick as he did so.

"Never mind it," he said. "I'll get along."

Kittie was off with a dash. They swung into the road on two wheels and went plunging down it toward the meadow below. Jim noticed how well Pattie drove the half-broken colt. Her slender arms were muscular, her wrists strong. Elbows were held close, the reins none too loosely. She kept her eyes on the job till they had crossed the valley and were climbing the hill opposite. By this time, Kittie's spirits were less effervescent. She had discovered that this was business, that back of the reins were skill, strength, and will.

It was a day of mild and pleasant sunshine. Above the saucer-shaped park, a blue sky stretched from rim to rim. From the branch of a cottonwood a robin cocked an eye at

them. Once a deer crossed the trail, looked at them for an instant with lifted head, and went crashing through the brush. Banks of flowers nodded at them in the breeze. Already there were a few columbines in bloom and some Indian paint brushes flaming scarlet in the timber.

Pattie drove through a birch grove to a clearing beyond. In it was a log cabin, from the chimney of which smoke poured. When Pattie called, "'Lo, Suel!" and gave a trill, a girl came to the door of the cabin. She was fair and softly rounded and clear skinned, with a flush of pink in her cheeks. Her first wave of the hand faltered and died away at sight of Jim. It was clear that she was shy and had little self-confidence.

Jim had the most curious feeling about her. She was a stranger come out of her unknown past to cross his life perhaps only for a moment. Yet she was not a stranger. Some queer stir of emotion in him went out to her, uncertainly, dubiously, but profoundly. It had nothing to do with his will, nothing to do with his desire. The tumult in his blood seemed to rise from some unknown source that lay in his being or in his experience rather than in his consciousness.

He heard Pattie introducing him to Sue Tedrow and found himself murmuring the usual bashful cow-puncher's "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Father's inside," the girl said timidly, blood racing through her soft cheeks. "Won't you come in?"

Homer Tedrow was at a rough home-made desk making notes from a book. He looked up at them, blinking through his spectacles in a rather helpless, absent-minded manner. He was thin, unkempt of hair, and careless of dress. His attire betrayed none of the vanity characteristic of most of the men dwelling on the frontier, a vanity which might show in only a single detail, but was usually in evidence in boots, sombrero, chaps, belt, kerchief, or saddle. When his mind

came back from the fog of his abstraction sufficiently to recognize Pattie, his face broke into an unexpectedly sweet and attractive smile.

He rose and took her hand, bowing over it with old-fashioned courtesy. "My dear, we're glad you've come to see us," he said, and lifted some books from a chair to make room for her.

"This is Mr. Tedrow," she said. "You know Bob told you about him when he borrowed some books Tuesday." Then, turning to Jim, "Shake hands with Mr. Tedrow, who taught me to read an' write an' most of what I know, which isn't very much."

Again Jim felt that emotion of excitement drumming through his blood, and this time with it went some groping sense of memories just evading him, almost within his consciousness but not quite, tantalizingly just beyond the horizon of his mental reach.

The two girls passed into Sue's bedroom, talking about neighbourhood affairs and little common interests as girls will. It was plain enough that they were the best of friends, forced, perhaps, into a closer companionship because there were few young women of their age and kind within the orbit of their lives.

The old man had all the instincts proper to a host. He wanted to make this young man welcome, to entertain him. Indeed, he felt peculiarly drawn to him. But he had no small talk, nor had Jim any with strangers, though he could rattle on easily enough with his fellow punchers at the Bar X Y. Therefore, conversation between the two was jerky and disjointed. It would begin with animation, falter, die down. Presently, either Jim or the old gentleman would try again, perhaps both at the same time. At last, by good fortune,

Jim mentioned one of the books he had just read. Tedrow took it up. In a few moments, his eyes kindled, he became fluent. Conversation, limited on Jim's part to a few necessary words of stimulation, was successfully launched.

Homer Tedrow took Jim into a small adjoining room to get a volume he had mentioned. Shelves of books ran round three sides of the room. Others littered the floor and were scattered on the table.

"I sleep here," he explained in his rather precise articulation. "It's really my study, if I may call it so. I'm not very practical. My neighbours find me a subject of mirth, I'm afraid. But that does me no harm and gives them enjoyment."

"I don't know why they should," Jim said indignantly. He felt a great respect for this scholarly old man who had ventured into such a strangely unappreciative environment.

"But it really does not matter. Not in the least." The old man felt drawn to make a confidence to this exceedingly appealing young fellow. "I'm writing a book, you know—or probably you don't—a sort of modern Plato's *Republic*, if I may have the audacity to compare myself for even a moment with one of the world's great men."

Jim's mind did not follow this. He thought of saying that he was a Republican himself, but he was not sure this was the right lead. Maybe the book wasn't really about current politics. So he merely said he hoped it would be successful.

"Oh, it won't," the old gentleman said cheerfully. "It is not likely ever to be published, but it serves to fill pleasantly my spare time. Philosophic speculation in regard to society  
——"

A harsh voice outside the house broke into the explanation.  
"'Lo there, Tedrow!"

There were sounds of the creaking of saddle leather, of heavy footfalls, of the squeaking of the puncheon floor beneath a weight.

Tedrow looked above his spectacles, ludicrously disturbed. "Dear me, I'm afraid that——"

He gave up his sentence, put down the book in his hand, and returned to the main room. Jim followed him.

"Ah! How do you do, Mr. Truesdale?" he said uneasily. "It—it's a fine day, a very fine day indeed."

The bad man frowned at him. Truesdale wore jean trousers thrust into dusty boots, an expensive sombrero, a butter-nut shirt with a red kerchief around his tanned rough throat. In his hand he carried a quirt.

"Where's Sue?"

Black Tom's cold, restless eyes fell on Turner. He stiffened at once, pointing the quirt at him. "What's that fellow doing here?" he demanded.

Their host was taken aback, a little shocked at having his hospitality outraged. "Why, he—he came up with Pattie to look at my books. He has been staying down at——"

"I know all about that," Truesdale interrupted roughly. "I don't want him here. Understand? Tell him to hit the trail—*pronto*."

"But, Mr. Truesdale," the unhappy host protested, "I can't do that. In a sense, I invited him to come. I let Pattie know he'd be welcome here."

"I'll invite him to go, then. I'll let Pat know he's not welcome here. Get out, young fellow, an' don't be slow about it. I'm tellin' you—Black Tom Truesdale!"

Pattie stood in the doorway. Over her shoulders looked Sue's anxious eyes.

"So you're giving the orders here now, are you, Tom? I suppose it's yore house since you're so free in it." Pattie



spoke quietly enough, but the flash in the eyes warned of rising temper.

She understood fairly well Truesdale's attitude of mind. In the first place, he did not like Turner. He had had his own views of the way to treat the wounded boy, and they had been overridden, partly at least because of Pattie's interference. Since he was used to having his own way, this was grievance number one. In the second place, this was his own private preserve. The very fact that he paid attention to Sue Tedrow was notice enough that other men were to keep away. He did not have to tell any of the young fellows of Lost Park this. They knew without being told that it was not safe to cross Black Tom. Therefore, when he turned his eyes toward Sue, she was, as far as they were concerned, already marked with the Truesdale brand. None of them was prepared to debate the question with Truesdale. But this young scrub of a cowboy from outside had dared to butt in. It did not matter that Pattie had brought him, that he might not be in the least interested in Sue Tedrow. He was here, and Black Tom did not intend any marriageable man to come to the place. His policy was one of isolation for the girl. He meant to marry her whether she wanted to or not, by the sheer force of his will and its pressure upon her.

"What say you mind yore own business, Miss Meddlesome?" advised Black Tom harshly.

"That's what I'm trying to do. I brought Mr. Turner here. Why shouldn't I—if I wanted to? I thought this was Mr. Tedrow's house, but, of course, if it's yours, if you own it——"

"He's still hangin' around yore place, is he?" interrupted the big man.

"If you want to put it that way. And you—you're still hangin' around here, I see."

Black Tom glared at her, choking with rage. It took him a moment to sputter out intelligible words. "By God, if I had the runnin' of you for just ten minutes, young woman—for just five minutes——" He stopped, clamping his strong teeth. The knuckles around his quirt stood out sharply.

"You'd use a quirt, wouldn't you? I think you told me that once before."

"Bet yore boots I would. Till you sang in a different tune, young lady. I'd learn you to mind yore own business. Mighty soon I'd have you eatin' outa my hand."

"You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you—breaking someone's spirit? It seems to be worryin' you because I'm so badly brought up. Don't let it. You're not responsible. Of course, I can't tell you it's none of yore business, because you're so much older than any of us young people—old enough to be our father. And I suppose I ought to respect old age."

"Old age!" roared Truesdale.

He took a step forward, glaring at her. His fingers tightened on the quirt. For a moment, Jim thought he was going to use it, and the young man's hand slid inconspicuously toward the butt of his revolver. But if swift punishment was in his mind, Black Tom thought better of it. That would mean not only a break with Hughes Henry, but active warfare with him. He feared no man, but he had reasons that did not permit him lightly to make an enemy of the girl's uncle. He breathed deeply, controlling his rage, then with a gesture seemed to fling her aside and turned on her guest.

"You, damn you! Didn't you hear me? Get out!"

"All right," Jim said mildly.

The young man had no wish to aggravate this man's passion. He was in a dangerous mood, and with the least excuse would have liked to transfer his rage at Pattie to an

object upon which he could actively vent it. The man's notorious reputation as a killer appalled Jim. He was still a boy, and he had no wish to face the fellow's fury. It was common knowledge that he would kill at the drop of a hat, as the saying was. His way was to lash himself into a frenzy and then destroy.

"Don' lemme see you again in the park. If I do——"

Jim nodded, and limped a step or two toward the door.

"If I get sight of you again, young fellow, I'm servin' notice right now that you'd better come a-shootin'. Anywhere in the park. Hear me?"

"Yes," Jim said.

"See you do like I say. I'm not Hughes Henry. You can't soft-soap me. For two cents Mex I'd skin you alive right now. I've a mind to do it."

"Mr. Truesdale," interposed Tedrow timorously, "I'll promise for this young man——"

"Keep outa this," barked the ruffian. "I'm talkin'. Me—Black Tom Truesdale. An' I'm layin' the law down."

"I'm leavin' the park soon as I can," Jim said.

"See you do! See you do!" the killer reiterated harshly. He followed Turner, towering over him. "By God, for two cents Mex"—he was in his rage repeating himself!—"I'd take yore hide off'n you now. If it wasn't for that limp, I'd certainly wear you to a frazzle."

Jim said nothing. He had reached the door now. He knew that at any moment the restraint Truesdale was imposing on himself might give way.

Pattie knew it, too. She was white to the lips. In part, at least, she had evoked this storm of anger by opposing the man. Why couldn't she learn to sing small at the proper time? Anything might happen now. Red tragedy was hovering very close. For she knew—one look at the boy's big eyes in

that white face, eyes fixed so steadily on the man bullying him, had told her this much—that if Black Tom so much as lifted that quirt to him murder would be done instantly. And if it came to a gun play, what chance would the untried boy have against the killer's swift and deadly flash of steel?

And just as she knew that Truesdale was pouring out his rage upon her friend because there was no other way to reach her, so she knew, too, that, if she opened her mouth to defend him, if she spoke a single word, the man would instantly fling away the remnants of his self-restraint. Never in her life, not even when Marshall had flourished his gun at the ranch, had she felt a fear like this, so paralyzing, so terrifying.

Jim turned and limped toward the buggy. His instinct told him he was safer not facing the man. Truesdale would not be likely to shoot him in the back. The danger was that he might leap forward and swing the quirt. Without looking round, he knew that Pattie was following him.

Together they hitched Kittie to the buggy. It was a slow business, for at every slight movement the mare quivered and trembled. At the least excuse, she was ready to kick out or bolt. Both of them knew that Truesdale was standing in the doorway glowering at them.

At last the straps were fastened. Pattie gathered the reins and stepped into the buggy. Jim released Kittie's head. There were some moments of fiddling and dancing before Jim could seat himself beside the girl.

As the buggy swung toward the road, both of its occupants could see Black Tom, still filling the doorway, a harsh and menacing figure of wrath.

## CHAPTER XIV

### JIM EXPLAINS

PATTIE'S hands were occupied fully with the reins during that first retreat into and through the birch grove. Her eyes were on the filly. But her mind was still full of the killer whose rage had almost overwhelmed them. Not till they were a quarter of a mile from the house did she break the silence.

"I'm a fool, the biggest one in Lost Park, I think," she broke out, angrily and remorsefully. Her anger was at herself, her remorse for the tragedy she had almost brought about, for her share in causing the danger that had been so imminent.

"I don't know why," the young man answered listlessly.

In his heart there was something akin to despair. Had he showed the white feather? Had he been a poltroon? No doubt he could justify himself for the course he had taken, but it took a good deal of explanation even to himself.

"If I hadn't led him on, if I hadn't made him furious."

"You've got no call to lie down an' let him tromp on you the way I did," he said bitterly.

"That's why he got so angry at you, because of what I said. He's right enough. I ought to be quirted."

He continued to pursue his train of thought, just as she did hers.

"I'm sure pleased with myself this mo'ning. 'Git off the earth, you coyote.' 'Certainly. Pleased to death to

oblige.' The boys down at the Bar X Y would be proud of me sure enough."

"That's foolish. You did just right. I'm the one was all wrong. I devilled him till he was crazy mad."

Jim continued the imaginary conversation: "'If you won't whop me, Mister, I'll crawl into 'a hole an' pull it in after me.'"

"What's the use of talkin' thataway? He's a terror. Once he gets started, there's no stopping him. I ought to have known better. I don't see what got into me, except that his high an' mighty ways always rile me. But it might have been awf'ly bad for you."

"If I hadn't been so humble and meek," he said, still tasting the bitterness of his submission.

"Oh, don't be silly. You had the sense to do the right thing. I hadn't."

"I don't want any trouble with him," Jim admitted. "He's too much of a wild wolf on the howl for me to play with. I've heard of these bad men, an' I've seen some. But most of 'em ain't one-two-three with him. I expect I'm lucky he let me off the way he did."

Pattie agreed with him.

He went on, trying to justify himself: "I'm no gunman like he is. From what a fellow hears he wouldn't think any more about pluggin' me than if I was a coyote. Still, at that, maybe I'd ought to have stood up to him an' told him where to get off at. It's up to a guy not to let another ride him too hard, don't you reckon?"

"I think you did just right," she told him again.

"An' me, I'm not so darned sure," he replied disconsolately.

Nor, as he thought it over later, did he become any more sure. He felt somewhat as he supposed a whipped cur must

feel. He had been browbeaten, threatened, ordered to de-camp, and almost kicked out—and he had meekly acquiesced without protest.

It was all very well to tell himself that there had been no other course open to him, unless he had been prepared to throw down a challenge to this human tiger and fight the battle out to a finish. Even if he had been willing to do this—and Jim knew well enough that he lacked the stark nerve to pit his youth and inexperience against the other's ferocity, his reputation as a gunman, and his cold-blooded willingness to kill—he could not have decently precipitated a fight in Homer Tedrow's house before his daughter and Pattie Henry. He had done right, but the rôle he had played shamed him, none the less.

Most men who met Truesdale sidestepped his unreasonable anger, which was usually in evidence when he had been drinking. Nobody in his right mind would choose to face so redoubtable and ruthless a killer. Yet the fact remained. Jim had been forced to sing small, and he did not like it. It hurt tremendously his boyish pride.

Pattie knew that his diminished spirit drooped, and she understood exactly why. She had lived her short life in a man's world, and she was discerning. But she could not again recur to the subject. It had been dismissed and was closed. To open it again would be to admit that there was some ground for his self-reproaches. A question of courage is one which comes too closely home to a man. Therefore, she ignored it, except when she told the story to her uncle in Jim's presence. Her first account was rather sketchy. It ended with characteristic denunciation:

"That man's the worst ever, Uncle Hughes. He oughtn't to be allowed where decent folks are. If it were my say-so, I'd send him off to Siberia for life."



"He's no parlour ornament," Hughes admitted. "But I don't reckon I quite get the point here. What were you two quarrellin' about this time?"

"We weren't quarrelling," she said; then corrected herself. "I reckon we were, too. Trouble is he thinks he's the law an' the Gospel. He gives orders like a Czar of Russia, and everybody has to step around an' mind him because he's such a holy terror. It's outrageous."

"Tom is some biggity," admitted Henry, "but I'm still shy of facts. What was he rarin' about now?"

"Oh, about Jim here," she said. "You know how he is—wants everyone to apologize for being alive."

Hughes turned to Jim. "Kinda picked on you, did he?"

"He ordered me around some. I didn't want trouble with him." The boy knew he was flushing. Gloss it over though he might, the fact remained that he had been abused and had stood for it.

"That's right," Hughes approved. "Tom isn't a man to have trouble with. I wouldn't choose to have any with him myself if I could help it. I'd go considerably outa the way to avoid it."

"Just the same a man oughtn't to stand more'n about so much, no matter who is ridin' him," Jim objected doggedly.

"I told him that was just foolishness," Pattie said.

"She's pretty near right, boy. Sidestep him. Don't rile him. You can't afford to mix with Tom, an' I can't afford to have you do it. I'm mighty glad you took whatever it was he had to say. An' while we're on the subject, suppose you tell me just what it was all about. I don't seem to be able to get anything outa Pat except that Tom's overbearin'. I know that already, so it's not news."

"He doesn't like me, an' he was mad because I went with Pattie to the Tedrow place."

"He's mad if any man goes there," explained Pattie. "He intends to marry poor Sue, and he doesn't want any competition. So as soon as he saw Jim, he ordered him outa the house and told him never to come back. To hear him, you'd thought he owned the place."

"Tom is thataway," Hughes agreed.

"He doesn't act so here."

"I'm not Homer Tedrow," Hughes told her. "He wouldn't get away with it here, so he wouldn't try. Tom has some sense, even if you don't credit him with having any."

"I said I'd go, but he kinda got to runnin' on me," Jim went on evasively.

But Pattie would not let it go at that. "It was my fault, Uncle Hughes. When he acted so high-heeled I asked him if he owned the Tedrow place. That made him mad, and from one thing we went to another till we got into a kinda row. Then he took it out on poor Jim."

"Pity you couldn't keep yore mouth shut oncet in a while, girl," Hughes reproved. "You're always naggin' Tom. Let him alone, I tell you. Quit pesterin' him, onless you want to get us all into trouble."

Pattie surprised him by her unwonted humility. "I'll quit, Uncle. I truly will. I never thought before. But to-day I was awf'ly frightened. I thought one time he was—was gonna do something terrible. Whatever he says, I'll keep still from now on."

Hughes patted her shoulder. "That's a good girl. I knew you didn't mean any harm, only it doesn't do to play with fire around gunpowder. Remember that. Every time you see Tom, just remember he's labelled 'Dangerous.' Then it'll be all right."

"Yes," she promised.

Jim told the rest of the story. Hughes sat back puffing

his pipe and mulling it over. He was disturbed by the recital. Truesdale was getting more and more difficult to handle. Hughes knew very well, or at least guessed, that the man was in various lawless projects with Sam Marshall and other wild spirits in and near Lost Park. He suspected that the ramifications of this band extended as far as Gold Hill and included some of the dwellers of that none too tame town. But this was none of his business. He had a capacity for minding his own affairs. This was one of the reasons why he was so influential in the park.

But this matter of the Tedrows was different. From the time that Homer Tedrow had come with his little daughter to the park they had in a sense been protégés of Hughes. He had given him work, had started him on his little ranch. Sue had played around the Henry ranch just like his own niece. They had come to him with their difficulties and he had straightened them out. He had no doubt that Tom intended to marry the girl in spite of her disinclination. Hughes did not like it. He did not like it at all. But what could he do, short of coming to an open rupture with Tom? After all, he had no right to interfere. If it had been Pattie he would have known what to do. No, the Tedrows would have to settle it themselves.

By way of dismissing the subject, he turned to Bob. "Wish you'd ride up to the cedar brake, son, an' see if there are poles enough in it to build that corral we figured on."

## CHAPTER XV

### A SHOT FROM THE BRUSH

JIM had arrived at the same conviction as Pattie. Her uncle was a good man, not at all in the same class as Marshall and Truesdale. Yet outside of the park his name was associated with that of Black Tom as a leader in lawlessness. How this had come about, Jim did not know, unless it was that his position of leadership entailed a tolerance of crime, an attitude studiously oblivious of the shortcomings of others.

The young man was thinking of this when Pattie came to him with a suggestion that they go with Bob on his trip of inspection to the cedar brake.

"If you think you're able to ride three-four miles," she added as a rider.

"Yeh. Think I could. Like to go with you," he said eagerly.

"It's pretty up there among the cedars. We could take some sandwiches and picnic, if you like."

"Say we do. That sure would be fine."

"Then I'll tell Bob. He'll like it, because he never likes to ride alone if he can help it. He likes company."

Jim's friendly winsome smile beamed on her. "I never did see anyone like you. Seems like you always guess what a fellow would like to do. Are all girls thataway?"

She flushed self-consciously. "I don't know many girls."

Bob saddled the horses and brought them to the house. Jim limped out. His own horse was one of the three. He

pulled himself to the saddle. Before Pattie mounted she looked up at him.

"If you think you'd better not go——"

"No, no, I'm all right. Fine as the wheat," he protested.

"Then, let's start," she called gaily to Bob.

They left the road to follow a path which dipped into the lowlands and crossed the meadow. It rambled in a leisurely way among the hills to the shoulder of the slope beyond. In single file, they rode along a narrow trail bordered here and there with prickly pear and catclaw. The way grew more precipitous, so that the muscles stood out on the shoulders and flanks of the horses as they clambered up like goats.

Pattie pointed with her quirt. "Up there, see! Between those two notches of rock at the rim. That's where we're going."

Through the notches they passed to a slope which rose like a park to a terminal ridge. It was cedar clad, the trees not too close, so that there was a spaciousness about it that let the blue sky down to the foliage. Across this park, beyond its tree-fringed rim, peaks lifted, almost as though they were reaching forward and looking over into the valley. Seen through the cedars, the sky was a deep blue unflecked by clouds.

"We'll picnic on the ledge," Pattie cried, leading the way.

They slithered down the rocks to a small sunny flat plateau, and here selected their picnic spot. Pattie opened the saddle bags and unpacked sandwiches, devilled eggs, and pickles. Bob sauntered off and presently returned with a pail of water fresh from a spring. They lay on the mossy carpet, in that cerulean blue, and ate with the keen, healthy appetites of youth, enjoying themselves in the gay, inconsequent fashion of their years. At ease, they talked casually about the subjects that interest cattleland.

Lunch ended, Bob rose and made ready to depart. "Me, I gotta go to work. Someone has to earn the living for the family."

He clambered back to the grassy slope. They could hear him whistling as he moved toward the brake where the smaller cedars were growing. His purpose was to estimate the number of posts which could be cut from the grove.

"Back in quarter of an hour," he shouted.

"Nice boy," Jim said, watching the young fellow swing away.

"Oh, he is," Pattie cried, her eyes shining. "The nicest ever. If you only knew——"

"Most too darn good-lookin'," Jim added.

"Oh, he never looks at a girl, if that's what you mean. He'd think that silly."

"Well, they'll look at him. They always do at that kind of a lad."

Young Turner lay in the pleasant sunshine, at peace with himself and his environment. He basked in a coma of well-being, alive to the appreciation of a kind and friendly world. It was good to be here, to be with this warm-hearted, vibrant girl, to feel the pulse of their fellowship. He watched her as she looked across the valley. Slender and quick with life, vivid and eager, yet always with that touch of the wild young forest thing.

And lying there he told her haltingly, in his awkward boyish way, how good it was to know the friendship of her and her people. Then, lest he might have said too much, he expanded his theme to the goodness of the world in general. It was what you made it, he told her. If you treated folks right——

A shot shattered the silence. Jim leaped to his feet and caught Pattie by the hand. She sprang up. They ran

crouching for the shelter of the rock wall and a stunted cedar growing from its edge. For a bullet had struck the mossy rock beside Jim and ricocheted away into space below. He cried to Pattie a warning.

"Look out! Get under the ledge. Stick close to it an' don't show yourself."

She was already kneeling up against the rock wall. "What is it?" she cried, alarmed.

"Someone shot at me—from above."

"From above?"

"Yep, look out! Don't show yoreself. Must 'a' been from above. See. The bullet hit the rock there—where the moss is ploughed up. Down close by the basket."

"But Bob's up there."

"They'll not bother him. It's me they're after."

"Who?"

Jim had a revolver in his hand. He lay pressed against the spreading trunk of the tree, trying to see without being seen. "I wonder," he said briefly.

A voice came down to them from the slope above, the boyish shout of Bob. "That you shootin', Jim?"

The cow-puncher reflected swiftly. It was as well, for the sake of her own safety, to let the assassin know that a woman was present. The code of Arizona did not tolerate war on women. She was, he thought, protected from any possible shot, but one could not be too sure.

"You answer," he told her.

"Bob," she called to her brother, "be careful. Someone shot at Jim. He might——"

From somewhere far above them came the sound of something threshing through the sapling cedars. This lasted for a few seconds. Following it came silence.



"He's gone—whoever he was," Bob called down, and Jim could see the boy move into the open.

"Maybe he has. Maybe he hasn't," the young man below shouted back. "Don't get out from cover."

"Saw his horse going hell-for-leather through the saplings," Bob told him.

"Maybe it's a trap!" Jim shouted.

"No, sir. He's gone, whoever he is. I'm going up for a look-see."

"If anyone is going, I'll go," Jim said, and he rose from where he was lying.

Bob pushed him back, as it were, with a gesture of his hand.

"Aw! stay where you're at, boy. I'm doin' this scoutin'. Nothing to it, though. I saw him lightin' out, and he sure was in a hurry. That guy is one absentee by now."

Young Hughes reached the horses, swung to the saddle, and rode into the growth of small cedars.

"You stay right here," Jim ordered Pattie. "I'll go with him."

"You'll not go without me," she said promptly. "I'll not stay here alone."

"You'll be all right if you stay under the ledge."

"Just the samey, I'm going with you."

"There's no sense in that. I've gotta go because I can't have Bob ridin' into a trap when it's me this guy wants to get. You see that, don't you?" he said a little impatiently.

"All right. I'm not keepin' you here. What I said was that I'm going, too."

"But you're not. You can't. There's no point to that. Why expose yourself? It's silly. No, you stay."

He began running up the hill toward the horses, limping as he went. Presently, he heard light footsteps behind him.

He turned, still running, and waved her back. Yet, when he had pulled himself into the saddle, she was already freeing the bridle of her own horse from the sapling to which it was tied.

"I told you to stay back there," he said, annoyed.

"Are you my boss?" she wanted to know. "Can't I do as I please?"

Audaciously she flashed at him eyes shining with excitement. Her blood raced. She could feel the drumming of her heart. Partly, no doubt, from the race uphill but partly, too, from the adventure. Never before had she been under fire. The thrill of it, now that she believed the enemy to be in retreat, gave her pulses a delightful fillip. She would not miss any of this for anything.

"You got no business acting thisaway, an' you a young lady grown. What would yore uncle say?"

"Well, leave him to say it. You're not my grandfather," she called back at him, chin tilted. Yet though she defied him, it was with gay and friendly eyes.

She was in the saddle, already moving toward the thick grove above. There was nothing for Jim to do but follow and try to regain the lead from her. He knew she had no business to be acting like this. But what could he do? It was just like Black Tom Truesdale had said. Her uncle had spoiled her. She did whatever she pleased, regardless of whether it was proper, or of what older people thought of it. Just now, for instance, she was cantering up the hill, cracking her quirt as she went, and moving at such a gait that he could not overtake her, try as he would.

She plunged into the thicket, Jim at her heels. He was still following her when they caught sight of Bob. The boy had dismounted and was examining tracks in the ground. At sight of them, he gave a joyous whoop.

"Here's where he went. When he reached the open, his horse was travellin' right fast. Yes, sir, Mister Man was in a sure-enough hurry to keep an engagement far, far away, looks like."

Coming out of the grove of saplings, Jim saw for himself how the strides of the horse lengthened as the rider had given the animal the spur upon coming into the open. It was as Bob had said—whoever the man was, he had been anxious to get away in time.

In time for what? Was it that he did not wish to be identified as a potential assassin from ambush? Or was it that he did not dare stay and see it out to a finish, man to man? That he had flung the challenge of a bullet at Turner and had not dared wait to see the result?

"Yep, he was certainly in a hurry to go," Jim said. "Why? What was drivin' him so fast? He had a rifle, an' me only a six-gun. He couldn't have been scared of me. It wasn't that."

"What was it, then?" Bob asked.

"It must 'a' been he didn't want us to know who he was. He wasn't above takin' a shot at me from cover, but he'd hate to have his friends know he'd done it."

Pattie, womanlike, went directly to the heart of the thing: "He didn't want Uncle Hughes to know he'd bushwhacked you after what Uncle said the other day. So he lit out lickety split."

"You mean——"

"Sam Marshall. That's who I mean. It couldn't be anybody else."

"Truesdale," suggested Jim doubtfully. He offered the name with no confidence. His own opinion was that Marshall had fired the shot.

"No." The girl vetoed this guess at once. "Tom Trues-

dale isn't afraid of anything alive. He'd as soon shoot you down before anybody, if he wanted to, but he wouldn't kill you from ambush. For one thing, he wouldn't admit to himself that you are dangerous enough."

"That's right. He's a dead shot, and he'd figure it a cinch he could beat you to the draw," her brother added. "But about Sam Marshall—I ain't so sure——"

"Well, I am," his sister insisted. "It's exactly the kind of thing he would do. I've always known he was half fox, half wolf. He did it, and nobody else in the world."

"Well, we can't prove it," Jim said, "but I reckon you're right. Wonder how he knew I was here."

"That is queer," she agreed.

"Maybe he saw us headin' this way," Jim suggested.

"I expect that was it. He saw us and followed. I bet Uncle Hughes will read the riot act to him," Bob said. "He'll not stand for this after he'd given him fair warnin' to keep hands off while you're here. Especially with Pat along. Why, she couldn't of been more than six feet from you when he shot."

"He'll deny it. He'll claim it wasn't him," Pattie said.

"Sure he will. Only thing he can do except to light right out an' keep going."

They repacked the saddlebags and rode home. But the gaiety had gone from the party. It was difficult to feel hilarious when at any moment a bullet might come ping-pong from the chaparral carrying death to one of them. Probably each one of the three felt a bit jumpy. When they caught sight of the buildings of the ranch-house across the valley below them Pattie put this tension into words.

"I'm sure glad to see the good old Hughes place. This ambushing business doesn't make any hit with me."

"Nor me either," agreed Jim.

## CHAPTER XVI

BY GAR TOLMAN

THEY rode across the valley to the ranch-house. Two men were sitting on the floor of the porch, their feet on the ground. One lounged against a post and smoked a corncob pipe. This was Hughes Henry. The other was lean and lank and untidy.

"Wonder who that is," Bob said.

Presently his sister gave him information. "It's old Uncle Joe Tolman from Standing Creek. That's who it is."

"Tha's right," the boy agreed. "Old By Gar!"

Pattie waved a hand at the old man and shouted a cheerful greeting. "Oh, Uncle Joe, you've been neglecting me for the other girls. And you promised to be true."

The old fellow was past seventy. He was whittling a pine stick, but he put his knife in his pocket to come forward and greet the girl.

"I'll take care of the horses," Bob said.

The other two dismounted.

"I have, too, been true," the visitor defended stoutly. "Never look at another girl. Tha's why I laid off an' rode over, to find out when you aim to settle down on Standing Creek with a lively young fellow who'll stay hitched an' is right dependable." He cackled gaily. It was his stock joke that Pattie was waiting only till he could get together enough worldly goods to make her comfortable. The jest served well enough, because he did not mean it, and she knew he did not.

"Whenever you're ready, Uncle Joe."

"Oh, by Gar, I'm 'most ready now. In 'two-threeyears——"

"Please don't wait till I'm an old maid. Every year now I'm getting older. Uncle Joe, this is Mr. Turner."

"Glad to meet you, young man. But don't you go makin' up to my girl."

Jim blushed. He did not look at Pattie, but if he had he would have seen the riotous colour flaming under the tan of her cheeks.

"Mr. Tolman came here lookin' for you, Turner," Hughes Henry explained.

"For me?"

"Yep. Seems yore friends got worried at not hearin' from you an' yore young friend. Some stories had leaked out about the lynching. So they sent a couple fellows up to find out what was what. They drifted in to By Gar's place, an' he promised to find out for them what he could."

Jim asked questions. Who were they? What did he tell them? Had they gone back to the ranch again?

"I'll have to be movin' along back there soon as I can," he concluded.

"Oh, by Gar, I really came to see you, Miss Pattie," the nester said with a semi-toothless grin. "Yore flapjacks as good as they usta be!"

"You'll stay here to-night and in the morning I'll give you some. Then you'll know. If you want my honest opinion, I think they're better."

The old man slapped his leg gleefully. "By Gar, you're whistlin', girl. I'll do right that."

Later, Bob explained him to Jim. "Uncle Joe's a queer old chap, a nester on Standing Creek. Nobody knows how old he is, but he still rides the range. Got funny notions. I've

seen him stand in the creek ten minutes in zero weather. He claims if his boots once get frozen his feet won't get cold."

Pattie made a chance to talk with her uncle after supper. She told him what had taken place at the cedar brake. As he listened Hughes Henry's eyes grew hard. It was not only that somebody in the park had defied him by shooting at his guest: the ambusher had shot at him while Pattie sat within a few feet of Jim.

"Have you-all got any notion who it was?" he asked.

"Couldn't have been anybody but Sam Marshall," she said.

"I've got my own notion about that," he said. "An' I've got more to go on than you. Sam was here right soon after you left this mo'ning. I happened to mention that the three of you were ridin' up to the cedar brake."

She stared at her uncle, big eyed. "So of course he slipped right up there and tried to murder that boy."

"I reckon."

"Yet you'd believe in him just as soon as you would in Jim Turner," she said bitterly.

"No, I wouldn't," her uncle dissented. "Not now. Not since I rode up an' had a look at that dead horse. He's a yellow coyote, Sam is. I told him so this mo'ning. I told him any man that would play a trick like he did on those two boys had ought to be hunted down like a wolf."

"You did?" She wanted to seize and kiss him, but she knew better than to do that, knew better than to let him see how pleased she was at his concession. For Hughes Henry had a good deal of natural human contrariness. "And what did he say?"

"Oh, lied—an' blustered around. I called his bluff right off the reel, told him he was a liar an' a skunk."



"He took it?"

"He had to take it. Or fight. He whined around about me not treatin' an old neighbour right. I told him I was through with him teetotally, told him not to show up here again. He didn't like it—not a little bit. If he'd had the nerve, he would have made a gun play. But he couldn't bring himself to it. There's a yellow streak in him a foot wide."

"Yes."

"I'm tellin' you this because it's right you should know. I've seen Sam make eyes at you. I'd of stopped it before now if I hadn't seen you had no use for him. He's no friend of mine, though I've had to put up with him for one reason an' another. But I've known for some time, ever since he got a notion about you an' him, that some day I'd have to put him in his place. Well, if he annoys you when you meet him, come right to me. Understand? I'll not stand for any of his tricks with you—not for a minute."

"I don't think he'll bother me," she said, after a moment's thought. "I don't think he'd dare. We've got too many friends, and you're too big for him to stand up to."

"Well, let me know if he does," Hughes said brusquely. "An' you can tell that young fellow Turner he can take his own time about leaving. Or maybe I better tell him myself. I expect he kinda thinks I've been a bit leery about his explanations. When a fella's tellin' the truth, he hates to be called a liar almost as much as if he were one."

"I think you'd better," she agreed demurely.

Old Joe Tolman left next morning after eating six of Pattie's flapjacks. He told her that he didn't know whether he could go back to his own pone bread or not. For his part, he thought that young folks ought not to put off setting up housekeeping too long. He reckoned he was old enough

to get married without waiting any longer, and he promised to come back soon for her. In the meantime, she wasn't to get to looking at any of the other young fellows.

Pattie promised smilingly. Neither of them knew that Uncle Joe was travelling that trail for the last time.

## CHAPTER XVII

### JIM SAYS GOOD-BYE

JIM had come into the park sick in body and mind, filled with suspicions of all who lived there. He had been taken in, nursed, fed, protected, and befriended. For the first time in his life, he had lived in a home. The Hughes family lived far from civilization, in the simplest way, and without many of the comforts that are necessities to those more fortunately situated. But there was in that log house an atmosphere which made for happiness. Hughes Henry might be a hard man. Certainly, in the outside world, he had that repute. But his heart was full of affection for these young people to whom he had been a second father, and they on their part returned this with interest.

It was not merely that they were fond of each other. They had their little family jokes. They made fun one of the other, and they indulged in spirited repartee which left no sting because the spirit back of it was friendly and generous.

All this was wholly alien to the life Jim had led in the bunk-house at the Bar X Y. Unexpectedly, he found himself very loath to go home. But he knew his employer would be expecting him, and he was now able to travel.

"I'm gonna hit the trail to-morrow," Jim announced at supper one evening.

"Reckon you can make it all right?" Hughes asked, in a

tone of casual friendliness which the boy valued more than elaborate politeness.

"Sure. I'm good as ever."

"Well, it's your say-so. But you're welcome to stay long as you like."

"If you put it that way, I'd stay quite some time," Jim said with a grin. "I like it here first rate. But I gotta be gettin' back. I'm puttin' them to a lot of trouble down at the ranch, sendin' out search parties an' that sort of thing. The work's pilin' up, too."

Jim did not sleep much that night. His mind, somehow, was racing. Thoughts tumbled over one another, helter-skelter. The die had been cast. He was going back to the Bar X Y. It was his home, as much as any place could be said to be that for him. Always he had been treated well there, and the boss had even favoured him because he had come there as a little friendless boy. But in one sense he felt much more at home with these people in whose house he had spent less than two weeks. He did not want to go back. He wanted to stay here with Bob and Pattie. They were young, his own kind. They took more interest in him than anybody else ever had, except Hal Shoreham, and he was human enough to like to be liked.

At last he fell into troubled sleep, gradually sank into sound slumber, and woke up with the sun pouring into his room.

Pattie had a specially good breakfast ready for him when he came downstairs. She knew he liked broiled ham and hot biscuits with syrup. They were served him fresh from the stove, done to a turn.

"Well, I'll be going," he said after breakfast.

Hughes Henry told him that he and Pattie would ride with him as far as the gateway. Pattie had put up a lunch for him to take along.

Their kindness brought a lump to the boy's throat. He had come to them a stranger, a suspect, and they had bound him to them with ties of friendship stronger than steel.

They set out in the crisp morning air and climbed the slope to the lip of the park. Along this they travelled, first through the timber and then among the scarred and ragged rocks, to the gateway of the park. They passed between the flat rocks to the world outside.

To Jim there came a swift stab of pain. Before him, filling the horizon, it almost seemed, was the big live oak from the limb of which the vigilance committee had done to death his friend. He had to bite his lip and look away to hide his emotion. It brought back to quick life memories of that day which now seemed so far away.

Pattie spoke to her uncle in a low voice: "Let's ride on a little way. Jim would like to see the grave."

"Right over there by the flat rock," the rancher told the young man.

Jim dismounted and walked across. The other two rode on a hundred yards and waited for him. Two stones had been set up, one at the head and one at the foot, to mark the exact spot where the boy had been buried.

At that moment Hal filled the mind of young Turner. It did not seem possible that this young fellow whom he had known always alive with vital and riotous activity could be in the city of the dead. Pictures of him flashed before Jim's mind. He saw Hal in the bunkhouse, his gay laughter ringing clear over all the others'; on the trail, riding, singing, flinging out the cowboy yell; by the camp fire, grinning across in quiet friendliness. And then, on the heel of these swift impressions, the sight of the limp body swaying in the breeze, suspended by a rope. For the moment, it seemed to him more than he could bear. His best friend, murdered with

appalling cruelty by men who posed as law-abiding citizens, who were good friends and kind fathers. It was horribly unthinkable. He looked around and shivered. Somewhere he had read about the Valley of the Shadow of Death. For him, this would always be that now.

He turned away at last and rode to the little knoll where his friends were awaiting him. Neither Pattie nor her uncle said anything about returning to the ranch. They rode on with him through the rough country which hemmed in the park. The landscape had been wildly tossed to and fro in prehistoric days. They rode across upended strata and wound among great boulders matted with broken tree trunks dragged down from the hills by slides. They passed into blind box cañons and emerged from these into deep gulches terminating usually in arroyos among a sea of cow-backed hills.

It was about five miles from the park when Hughes Henry drew up.

"Can you find yore way outta these hills, Jim?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Keep that ridge always to yore left. When you lose it, bend to the right when you are in doubt. You'd ought to strike old Joe Tolman's place along in the fore part of the afternoon. I reckon we'll be hittin' the back trail. So long, son."

He shook hands. So did Pattie. She gave the boy the warm swift smile which lit her brown face as sudden sunshine does a gray day.

Hughes Henry was looking up at the ridge above. There was in his eyes a puzzled, questioning look.

"You'll come back and see us?" Pattie said to Jim.

He promised that he would. He held her hand a moment, embarrassed. He wanted to tell them both how much he was

in their debt, but he was of an age and class inarticulate. Therefore, he dropped her hand and simply said, "So long."

A moment later, when they were riding one way and he the other, he regretted his dumbness. Why couldn't he have told her how much they had done for him, how much they meant to him? They would think him ungrateful and ungracious. But it was too late now. He set his horse to the trail.

Hughes drew up and looked again toward the ridge.

"What are you lookin' at?" asked Pattie.

"Nothin'," he said. "I'm not so sure——"

"Not so sure of what?"

He let her question go unanswered. What was the use of worrying her about nothing? Yet he could not get out of his mind the thing that was troubling him, and when they reached the park gateway he was still thinking of it. He had seen a man on horseback far up on the ridge above Jim.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### JIM LOOKS INTO A SIX GUN

**K**EEPING the range on his left, Jim rode into the hill-tossed sea flung up by some wild convulsion of nature in a prehistoric era. Soon he was lost in a maze of cañons, blind gorges, ridges, and draws, but he had been born and brought up in this tip-tilted frontier country, and knew by a sixth sense of direction and by the sun that he was headed the right way.

He was lonesome. When last he had travelled these hills, Hal had been with him. He was going back by himself to the ranch to tell the story of his dreadful loss. He missed Hal, and in missing him missed Pattie, too. He wanted her to comfort him without knowing the reason why his heart turned to her.

If he had met her while he had been riding the range near the Bar X Y he would have thought her a pretty girl and straightway have forgotten her. But she had come into his life when he had been spiritually sick for the comfort of a woman, when he had been so sore wounded at the loss of his friend that nothing else could have healed the hurt. She had administered to him bodily and mentally, had brought strength to his lax muscles and laughter to his eyes. He would not soon forget the Henrys.

He was not used to such consideration as they had given him. It was amazing, to his boyish understanding, that they had taken in an enemy and received him as a friend.

Their kindness warmed his hungry heart as nothing else had ever done.

If his mind had not been preoccupied, Jim might have seen the shadow that dogged his steps. Now it was far above him on a ridge, again it was trailing him through a gulch. Usually it was out of sight, but now and again it could have been glimpsed for a moment, as though to make sure it had not lost him in this labyrinth of tossing hills.

The sun rode higher in the heavens. It marked at last midday and Jim began to think of "throwing off" for lunch. Beneath a ledge which rose above him, Jim sat down to eat the sandwiches which Pattie had put up for him. He fell on these with the ravenous appetite of healthy youth.

Then, having smoked a cigarette, he lay down on a sloping rock in the warm sunshine. He thought of all the things that had recently befallen him. They had been full days, these since he had left the Bar X Y to explore Lost Park. They had brought him sorrows and joys and friends and enemies. Now he was going back again to take up his old life, but it would never be quite the same. He had left the ranch a boy; he was returning a man.

Presently he fell asleep.

And as he slept, the shadow that all day had dogged his heels crept closer—and still closer. It slid along the soft and mossy carpet leading to the rock ledge. It stopped, moved forward again, silently, watching, furtively. And in its movements there was something cruel and deadly, something that might have reminded an observer of both the wolf and the fox, and even at moments of a poisonous rattlesnake. At last the shadow halted.

Jim sat up suddenly, startled to wakefulness. A voice had called to him, and at the sound of it a curious chill ran down his spine. Simultaneously a loop dropped over his head,

passed his shoulders, and tightened with a jerk around his arms and waist. The loop was at the end of a *reata*.

"Don't move!" the voice warned.

Jim looked in that direction. The bottom dropped out of his heart. At the end of the rope, a big .44 in one hand, stood the scar-faced man.

"Lie on the rock, face down."

The trapped man kept his eyes on the other, considering for a long moment. Was there any escape, any alternative? And he knew there was none.

He lay prone, as he had been told. Marshall took his revolver from him.

"Now rise," the next order came. "Slow—no funny business—an' turn round—keep turnin' . . . That'll do."

Jim had wound the lariat around his body in such a way that both arms and legs were now roped. Marshall stepped forward cautiously, and with savage jerks tightened the rope. He knotted it, wound it round once more, and made another knot behind the prisoner's back.

"That'll hold you, I reckon, for a minute," he said with a curse.

He ran to Jim's horse, untied the *reata* from the saddle, and returned with it. The loop he flung around the captive's neck and drew it tight. Then he tossed the other end of the rope across a long spar of rock that jutted out from the cliff.

All this had taken only a very few minutes. Jim as yet had not spoken a single word, his captor only the curt few necessary to make him understand what he was to do. Now, the prisoner being secure, the two men's eyes fastened in a long look of hate, one measuring the other's purpose steadily, the second exulting furiously in his success.

Marshall was the first to break the silence. His triumph rode him. It could not wait. "Like I told you—soon," he boasted.

Jim did not answer. He had been a fool, and this was the fruit of his incredible folly. His threat to kill the murderer of Hal Shoreham had come to nothing. To his mind there flashed a proverb about sending a boy to mill. Well, that was how it had been, he thought bitterly; a boy had gone on a man's job. He might have known that Marshall would be waiting for him, he might have known the fox would set a trap for him. Instead, he had taken it for granted, because he had seen nothing of the man, that he would be safe in this great wilderness of silence. It had not once occurred to him that he was being followed. If he had ever glanced back, it had been from no motive of caution.

But there arose within him a grim resolve. He had been a fool; he would not be a coward. This devil was gloating over him, meant without any question of doubt to kill him. His mean soul would rejoice to see the prisoner break down and beg for mercy. That was why he had not instantly shot him while he was asleep. That was why he had taken the trouble to tie up his victim, had flung the rope around his throat. The villain wanted Jim to taste the full measure of terror, wanted to hear him begging for the life there was no chance of saving. If he could torture him until he weakened under the strain, the fellow would exult. Jim swore to fool him there. Let Marshall do his worst, he would be game and face the music. It would not be long. All he had to do was to stick it out, to go through without weakening.

"You made yore brags you'd get me, that you'd get Sam Marshall," the man went on, his face a map of cruel and savage hatred. "Easy to do that, with yore friends around you, with Hughes Henry sittin' in and backin' yore play.

Easy when you knew I couldn't touch you. Fine! Big man you! Well, here I am. Make good yore brags. We're alone like you claimed you wanted to be. Come through with the goods, you four-flusher. I've travelled a right smart way to-day to give you a chance."

His laughter rang out, harsh and jeering mockery, an evil and a menacing sound. Then, suddenly, at the other's silence his rage surged up. He struck heavily with clenched fist the young man's cheek.

A patch of red flamed in the boy's face. His burning eyes were a challenge. He looked in scornful contempt at the bully. But if he wanted to speak, he kept the words back of the clenched jaw that padlocked the mouth. He knew Marshall was trying to drive him to words, to weak submission. Therefore, he said nothing.

"*You* get Sam Marshall! *You!* Why, you poor rube, I've been on yore trail all day, jes' a-waitin' for my chance. An' you, you don't even know it. You go to sleep, like the damn fool you are. An' lie there snorin' for me to bump you off. Too easy. A kid outa the cradle would know better than that, looks like. Get *me*. By God, I gotta laugh!"

He did, strange raucous laughter in which rode baleful mirth, born in the hell of an evil heart. Then, in an instant as it seemed, his passion drove it away.

"Twice before I'd 'a' got you if you hadn't hidden back of Pat Henry's skirts." He strode up and down in front of the helpless victim, the end of the rope in one hand, the .44 still in the other. "Oncet down at the ranch, like I done told you; the other time at the cedar brake. If she hadn't been there, both times——"

He broke off, to shoot tobacco juice at a flat rock. "Thought you could play a game like that on me, did you? On me, Sam Marshall. Me! Hell, I'm a gray wolf, an'

it's my night to howl. Sneak an' court my girl an' make up to Hughes an' get me kicked off'n the place. Slick work, Mr. Spy, but it don't get you a thing. You're through. Understand? I'll send you to hell if it's the last thing I ever do." The man's furious jealousy and savage triumph were horrible to see. "You're done—done. At the end of yore rope."

To stress the point, the man pulled hard on the lariat, tightening the loop so that Jim felt himself strangled. Then, in a moment, the knot was slack and the clean air was pouring once more into his lungs.

It was true—literally true. He was at the end of his rope, his own rope. The fellow meant to hang him, as Hal had been hanged a short time before. The thing was devilish; none the less, it would be done.

Marshall dropped the end of the rope and put his revolver on a rock. From a hip pocket he took a plug of tobacco and bit into it. His stained irregular teeth gnawed at it, worried into it, so that for an instant Jim saw him as a wolf tearing at the flesh of its kill. There was something ferocious about the action, something that typified the man. He would kill, without pity, without any remorse, and go his way justified of what he had done. He was a wolf, as he himself had said.

Marshall cocked an eye at the sun, squinting in the strong light. His broken teeth showed in a grin.

"Expect I'm keepin' you waitin'," he jeered. "Probably you're in a hurry. When a fellow's headed for hell, he wants to keep his engagement with the devil." He put the plug of tobacco back into his pocket and picked up once more the rope.

Jim, white to the lips, could keep silent no longer. "You spawn of hell," he burst out.

"Sho! Found yore tongue, have you? Good. Beg! Get on yore knees and beg. Come crawlin' to me."

"No."

"Yes, by God!" The man's eyes flared to rage. "Don't talk back to me. It's my say. I'm playin' the tune an' you'll dance." He caught the rope with both hands and pulled. Agony shot through Jim's body. His throat was on fire, his lungs ready to burst. Life was being driven out of him. He was sinking, in waves of pain, to unconsciousness.

He came back to life, coughing for breath, lying huddled on the rock. When the fogs cleared, he saw again that ferocious grin, heard once more the hoarse voice.

"How about it now? Like I said, I'm the fiddler. You done been dancin' on air." Suddenly Marshall snapped out of his mirth. "Come crawlin' to me—an' beg. Hear me! Beg for yore carcass, feller. I'm talking. Me, Sam Marshall. You're damn whistlin', I am."

The boy lay there coughing. He did not answer his tormentor. He did not look at him.

Marshall stepped forward and kicked him brutally, again and again. "I'll show you—I'll show you." His hand wound round the rope and dragged at it even while the heavy boot was crushing his victim's flesh.

The waves of unconsciousness surged toward Jim again. He found himself floating on them.



## CHAPTER XIX

"HAVIN' A LI'L' FUN WITH THE KID"

AT THE gateway to the park Hughes Henry drew up. He had been irresolute for an hour and at last had come to a decision.

"You ride on to the ranch, Pat," he told his niece. "I'm going back."

"Back where?" she asked, surprised.

"Back to that boy, Jim Turner."

"What for?"

"I'm not satisfied," he told her. "Awhile ago I saw someone on horseback on the ridge. I been wondering——"

"You think——?"

"I'm not sayin' I think one thing or the other. Might be Sam Marshall—or it might not. Kinda funny anyone was up there an' didn't give us a yell. I reckon I'll ride back, jest on the off chance he might be layin' for young Turner."

"Can't I go with you?"

"No need. Probably it's foolish me goin' back, but it kinda sticks in my mind I'd ought to go have a look. You ride on home. I expect there's no sense in my going back, but I'd feel easier in my mind, so I'll trail back an' satisfy myself."

"Well," she assented reluctantly, "only I'd like to go, too."

"No use both of us being foolish," he said. "You go right along an' forget all about it."

"I don't think it is foolish. Lemme go, too, won't you? If it was Sam Marshall you saw——"

Her eager eyes pleaded for her so powerfully that he gave way.

“Oh, well, come if you like. But we will sure both of us look mighty simple when we meet up with young Turner—if we catch him this side of By Gar’s place, which we likely won’t with him having so big a start.”

They travelled fast, considering the nature of the ground to be covered. Both of them were hill dwellers. They knew how to guide to the best advantage these horses used to the precipitous trails of the mountains. The mazes of these blind cañons, the roll of endless hills, the gorges through which they passed, were familiar landmarks to them. Not once did they have to hesitate to discover whether they were going the right way. But more than once Hughes swung down from the saddle at the edge of some sandy wash to make sure that Turner was still ahead of them and had not got lost in the labyrinth of rough timbered country through which they were passing.

On one such occasion he ripped out an exclamation of surprise. It was at the entrance to a small box cañon.

“Two men rode through here,” he told his companion. “Not together. One of ’em ahead of the other. See here.”

Pattie swung from the saddle and joined him. He pointed out the footmarks of two horses, the tracks of one partly obliterating the other in two or three places.

“Are they fresh tracks?” she asked, much disturbed.

“Yes. See how the soft dirt here is crumbling down over it. See how it is still fallin’.”

“Let’s hurry,” she pleaded.

“I expect it’s all right,” he reassured her. “Still——”

He did not feel as easy as he pretended. This was not a main travelled road, but a trail known only to a few. How did it happen that they had not met the man following

their departing guest? Of course, it was possible that Turner might be the second rider. If not, whoever he was must have hit the trail at some point between the park and this cañon. In other words, he must have come down from the ridge above. If so, why? Someone might have been combing that ridge for strays. But if so, it was not probable that he would be so soon hitting the trail out of the hills.

It was noon. The position of the sun told them so. They continued steadily to travel. No conversation passed between them. The trail, if trail it might be called, was just here particularly difficult. It ran up a trough, on either tilted side of which was timber. Along the bottom of it were piled boulders flung down by the wear of a thousand years. Twisted between these were dead logs jammed in by the torrents made from heavy hill rains. Sometimes they clambered up one slope, sometimes up the other, to escape the mat of interlacing down timber and rocks.

From this they came at last up a stiff slope to the foot of the ridge which rode the hog-back. They travelled parallel to this for a time, except that the trail edged toward the rock rim.

"They're still ahead of us," Hughes said.

His niece stopped him. "Listen!"

The stillness was shattered by a voice, just round the bend, not fifty yards ahead of them. It was a harsh, threatening voice, familiar to both of them. The two riders looked at each other and without a word dismounted.

"Stay here," Hughes told his niece in a low voice. He drew his revolver and crept forward.

The words formed by that raucous voice reached him:

"Feller, here's where you get off. You monkeyed with a he-man, you pore li'l squirt—got him in bad with his friends,

an’ naturally you gets bumped off. Come on, feller, beg for yore life.” Then, with a shriek of rage, “Damn you, beg, or I’ll string you up again.”

There came no answer. The cruel, snarling voice took up again its tirade: “Me ’n’ you, like I said. I told you fair an’ square. All right. Here’s where you kick off.”

Hughes stepped around a point of rock. He saw two men, one bound and helpless, a rope around his neck, the other a picture of crouched and ferocious malice, teeth bared, yellow eyes gleaming. The other end of the rope was in his hand.

“Crawl, I’m tellin’ you. On yore knees, feller. An’ quick,” ordered Marshall.

The face of the prisoner had gone white, except where a livid bruise stood out on one cheek. From his lips the blood had fled. He leaned against the face of the rock for support. But the eyes—dreadful staring eyes—flung back defiance at the wolfish countenance glaring at him with bared teeth. It was the final gesture of a man who knew he had come to the end of the passage.

Then Hughes spoke, very quietly, almost in a drawl: “Crawl yoreself, an’ see how you like it.”

Marshall jumped, swung round, with chin fallen, a ludicrous look of dismay in the fishy eyes.

“Why—why—Hughes——” he gasped.

“Not expectin’ me, Sam, I reckon.”

“No—no, I—I was kinda havin’ a li’l’ fun with this kid—scarin’ him, as you might say.”

Henry looked past the miscreant into the pallid face of his victim. The young fellow leaned against the wall, eyes shut, head fallen back. He was on the edge of unconsciousness. He had, it was plain, been tortured beyond endurance.

“Yes,” assented the ranchman. “Now it’s my time to

have a little fun. First off, step forward an' take the rope off'n the boy's throat."

Marshall moistened his lips with his tongue. He slanted a look at Henry, a glance compound with sudden rage and fear. He knew there was no chance of making a fight of it, at least not yet. Unfortunately, he had left his .44 on the flat rock, and it was four or five feet from him. For all practical purposes, it might as well have been at home in his shack. If he could throw Hughes off his guard, perhaps——

"I didn't aim to do him any real harm. I was jes' a-foolin'," the man whined, moving forward to unloose the rope from the neck of the young man.

Hughes Henry's eyes, grown cold and bleak, observed that the neck of the victim was red and inflamed. He had Marshall's own word for it that young Turner had already been dragged from the ground and lowered again, plainly to torture him more.

"Put that rope round yore own neck," Hughes ordered. The scar-faced man made a sickly attempt to grin. "You're sure enough funnin', Hughes."

"Do like I say—*pronto!*" The words came curt and cold.

"Now, Hughes, lemme explain——"

"I'll shoot you down like the wolf you are if you don't."

The colour ebbed from Marshall's face. He did as he had been ordered.

"Now unloose that boy."

"Sure. Sure. I was aimin' to do that, anyway." The man's voice fawned as he set about untying the knots. "Course, I know you can take a joke, Hughes. I got on the peck because the young fellow done me dirt, an' I aimed to teach him a lesson. Mebbe I was a mite rough, but nothing to raise a rookus about. There he is, good as new."

The boy's body slid down to a sitting posture. He opened his eyes and took in slowly the situation.

"You—got here—just in time," he gasped, his hand at his burning throat.

"Sho! nothin' to that. Nothin' a-tall to that," Marshall said with attempted ease, sliding his furtive yellow eyes at Henry. "I was only foolin'. We all like our li'l' joke. No hard feelin's."

"Come here!" Henry ordered. "No, on yore knees. Come crawlin'."

The other man's face twitched. "Looky here, Hughes——"

"Better do like I say." The words were low, but each one was spaced and fell like a splash of water.

Again the fellow moistened his lips. There was no way out. He knew Hughes Henry meant to kill him if he did not obey. He dropped to his knees and shuffled forward, whining protestations.

Henry's left fist crashed into the uplifted face and knocked the man prone.

"Get up," he ordered. "An' come here."

"Don't you. Don't do that, Hughes. An' us old friends," the other pleaded abjectly, nursing his cheek.

"Come here. No, walk, you yellow coyote. I know you can crawl, an' knowing it is enough."

Once more the ranchman's driving fist flung him down.

Marshall lay groaning where he fell.

Hughes strode across to the flat rock to collect the two revolvers lying there. At the same time his niece ran past to Jim.

"Has he hurt you—much?" she cried.

The boy grinned at her, feebly, wanly, for the fear of death had just been lifted from his heart and he had twice been

lowered back to life after the agony of impending dissolution.

"Question is, what to do with him. Had I ought to make a clean job of it with him?" Hughes frowned, asking the question of the world at large. He knew he could not kill the fellow, but he wanted to frighten him badly.

"Don' talk thataway, Hughes," Marshall pleaded. "You an' me been friends. I never hurt you none. Now, did I?"

"If I let him go, I'll be sorry for it some time," Hughes went on as though he had not heard the man. "What say, Turner? You're the one he done the meanness to."

"He would have killed me if you hadn't come," Jim said. "But—let him go this time. I aim to get him myself when his time comes."

"No, I'm dashed if I do. Pat, give me that quirt you're carryin'," Hughes said, and turned to Marshall. "You step along ahead of me thataway."

The two men disappeared around the bend. Marshall's whining appeal came back to the two left behind. Presently, from a distance of fifty or seventy-five yards, came a cry that was half a shriek and half a whine.

"Don't do that. Don't you, Hughes. I'll not stand for—— Ouch! You're killin' me. My God, don't. Don't! For the love of——"

The words broke into a scream of pain. Pattie's gaze plunged down at Jim's. She was white to the lips. "Good enough for him. I'm glad. If we hadn't come——" A cold tremor ran down her spine. "Is there anything I can do? Some water?"

"In my canteen there," Jim said. He felt weak and sick.

Presently, Hughes came back alone, the quirt still in his hand. He looked at it in deep disgust, then flung it away. "You wouldn't want to use it on a decent horse now," he said by way of comment.



“What’ll we do with Jim?” Pattie asked in a low voice.  
“Where’ll we take him?”

“How bad are you, boy?”

“I’m—all right—some sick, but——”

“Could you get to By Gar’s place? It’s not more’n a mile an’ a half.”

He nodded. “Yep. I’m only kinda—done up. Tha’s all.”

Pattie brought his horse. With the help of Hughes, he pulled himself to the saddle.

Forty minutes later, the three wound down a steep trail to a log cabin in a draw below a pine-clad slope.

Jim was clinging to the pommel of the saddle for support. He was fighting against faintness and nausea.

Old Joe Tolman, with a knife and a piece of pine in his hand, came out from his cabin and watched them approach while he whittled leisurely.

“Oh, by Gar, you done come over to see what my place looks like, Miss Pattie,” he called out. “I’d ’a’ had it all combed out and primped up in its store clothes if I’d knowed you were comin’. Still an’ all——”

“This boy’s sick, By Gar,” Henry interrupted, as he swung down to help Jim from the saddle. “Can you take him in here?”

Old Joe Tolman dropped his facetious raillery. “Sure I can, if he’ll put up with what I got. It’s rough and plain. I’m no fancy cook like Miss Pattie.”

“He’ll be all right soon. He’s had a shock.” Hughes helped Jim into the house and to the bed.

Jim sank down in a temporary physical collapse.

“Wha’s the matter with him?” Tolman asked.

“Sam Marshall’s been devillin’ him. Tell you about it outside,” Hughes answered.

## CHAPTER XX

### AT THE BAR X Y

JIM stayed at Joe Tolman's place two days. The old man waited on him with the kindness of a woman, flavouring his attentions with the quaint speech for which he was noted. He was a character, one of the vanishing race of frontiersmen who had an individual quality indigenous to the country. His words were spiced with a homely philosophy born of a long experience with a world which he found good because of the human kindliness from his own heart.

At the end of the second day, a puncher from the Bar X Y rode in to ask the old man what he had learned about the missing riders.

Young Turner, lounging on his bunk, heard the rider talking to his host and walked to the door.

"'Lo, Pete," he called.

Pete turned and gave a whoop. He was a short man with a simple face, the features of which might have been modelled in putty. "You blamed ol' sockdolager. Where in time did you drap from?" He rolled across to the house and offered a hand half as big as a ham. "Put her there, Jim."

"By Gar, he came pretty near gettin' bumped off," his host said.

"How? Who? When? Onload it on me."

"It's a long story," Jim said.

"Well, I got all week. Hop to it. An' say, is it true what they are tellin' about Hal?" Pete asked.

Jim nodded, his eyes filling. "He's—gone."

The cow-puncher flushed angrily. "Someone had oughta get the everlastin' daylights shot outa him for that. If ever there was a boy who would grade A-1 it was Hal. All wool an' a yard wide. Doggone it I—I liked that boy. Tell it to me, Jim."

It was, as Jim had said, a long story. He told first the bare facts about his friend's death, then filled in a very expurgated tale of his own adventures since. It was not necessary for Pete to know all that he knew about conditions in Lost Park. The complete story was reserved for his boss, the owner of the Bar X Y.

Pete listened, his mouth and eyes open. He interrupted once or twice to swear mildly and ineffectively.

"Dog my cats, that feller Marshall is sure enough a bad actor," he pronounced when the story was done. "He'd oughta be strung up his ownself. That's whatever. An' I aim to loan the lend of my rope when the boys meet up with him. Y'betcha!"

Old Tolman did not commit himself as completely. He lived too close to the park to publish opinions about its undesirable citizens. But Jim could guess his views.

"The Old Man sent me to look you up, Jim," continued Pete. "He said for me to bring you straight home if I found you. We've been right worried at the Bar X Y. The old man gives it out he's through lettin' any of you young colts kick up yore heels on the open range from now on. He aims to run you in a pasture an' keep you broke to the saddle."

Next morning the two riders started back to the Bar X Y.

Old Joe Tolman leaned on a fence and said his "So long" as they made ready to ride away.

"Come back soon. The latch is out," he added.

"Sure I will. You come down to the Bar X Y, Uncle Joe," Jim returned.

"Yep, come an' stay a week with me whenever you can, son. You, too, Pete."

"Betcha. You come on down, Uncle Joe."

"Sure. Well, take care of yoreself. An' don't let the marshal round you up." The old fellow cackled over his pun merrily.

"Not if I see him first. Well, meet up with you down at the ranch one of these days," Jim shouted.

"So long."

"So long."

They reached the ranch about supper time that night. Before he slept, Jim had to tell twice more the tale of his expedition, once in the bunkhouse to the men and again in the big house to the Old Man.

Walter K. Trapper was a big forceful man in the fifties. His hair was iron-gray, eyes blue, cheeks leathery and bronzed from the beating of a thousand summer suns and winter winds. He wore a corduroy suit of olive-drab, custom-made boots into which the ends of his trousers were thrust, and a big Stetson hat of the three-gallon variety.

"Son," he said, "there have been a lot of rumours blowin' around about this thing. The fellows that hanged Hal were from up Squaw Creek. So I hear. Hugh Botsford's crowd. But what of that? We can't touch them. Nothin' to do about it. Fool business! Criminal carelessness, if you like! Yes, but where do we have a look-in? They figured they were hangin' a horse thief. Bad medicine,

you say. An' I say it, too. An' right there we got to quit followin' that trail. They're honest citizens who made a damn fool mistake. But this Sam Marshall—that's another business. He sawed that horse off on Hal knowin' what was likely to happen. No doubt about that. He's a murderer, the way I look at it—guilty as hell. An' if we can lay hold of him——"

Jim's eyes met those of his boss. In them burned a curious light that made them cold and drear.

"You don't need to bother about him. I'll 'tend to that. I told him so. Then I went to sleep like a darn fool kid. Well, I've done learned my lesson, I reckon."

"He's a bad man, son," Trapper said doubtfully, lighting a big black cigar after offering Jim one which he declined. "Got the reputation of a killer. I don't know as you want to tangle with him."

"Yes, he's a killer. But he's yellow clear through. He crawled on his hands and knees to Hughes Henry. He yelped like a dog when Hughes quirted him. Unless he got the drop on me, I wouldn't be scared of him. He's not like that Black Tom Truesdale."

"You saw Black Tom, you said?"

"Yep. Saw him and talked with him an' was bullied by him. He 'most got me to thinkin' I had no right to live. That's one guy whose range I'm keepin' off when I can. After he's been drinkin', they say he's liable to break loose any time. But there's one thing about him, he doesn't plug you in the back. He's such a sure shot an' so swelled up on himself he's never scared of an even break. Thinks he's the best man alive with a gun."

"Then he's really not so dangerous as Marshall, because you can keep away from him an' so not have trouble."

Trapper changed the subject. "What kind of fellow is Hughes Henry now? It's been nearly twenty years since I knew him."

"The finest ever," Jim said with enthusiasm. "At first he was a little suspicious of me. Pat kept tellin' me how good he was an' after a while I saw it myself. He saved my life—twice."

"Who is Pat?"

"She's his niece."

"Must be his brother Hardy's girl, I reckon. He had a boy, too, didn't he?"

"Yep, Bob. They're twins."

The boss of the Bar X Y leaned back in his chair comfortably and blew fat smoke wreaths without knowing he was doing so. His mind had carried him back twenty years; no, nearer thirty, to a time when he and the Henry boys had been like brothers. There had come differences between them, but in those days of rollicking youth they had been true comrades. Those had been good days. If anybody had told him then that he and Hughes would become estranged and go divergent paths, driven into enmity by passion and held there by pride long after the heat of the conflict had died down, Trapper would have given the prediction no second thought. But so it had been. Life does queer tricks, he reflected. And after all, it had been Hardy Henry and not Hughes who had married the girl.

"Good health and easy circumstances?" asked the big rancher.

Jim understood that he referred to Henry. "Yes. A powerful man, I'd say. He's got a nice place, an' it's well stocked. I don't reckon he's got much money laid by, but of course I don't know. Like enough I'm talkin' through my hat."

"He wouldn't have money—not Hughes. It was easy come and easy go with him. Years ago, when we were boys, he and I were thick as you and Hal were. Fact is, you two reminded me of us, the way you did everything together." Trapper drew a deep breath, his mind busy with retrospection. "Far as yore friendship goes, I expect it's just as well you lost Hal now instead of losing him in another way. No sting to it. You'll always remember him as yore best friend."

"Yes," Jim said. But he did not agree with his boss. It seemed to him impossible that anything could ever have come between him and Hal.

The cattleman roused himself from his memories.

"Well, take it easy for a day or two till you feel strong again. You don't need to bust a tug gettin' yore back into the work."

He rose and stretched himself. Jim understood that he could go. He returned to the bunkhouse.



## CHAPTER XXI

### GOLD HILL

THE name Gold Hill was a euphemism. The town lay sprawled on a cactus-covered flat, and there was no evidence of the precious metal to the inquiring eye. Once, many years ago, there had been a month when Gold Hill was the latest stampede. Some prospectors had washed sand in the creek, and it had panned well. After the news spread, the place swarmed with the flotsam and jetsam of the frontier. The prospects had looked good for a time, but it developed that the strike was only a pocket. The excitement died down, and interest passed to a more recent discovery.

That was in the long-forgotten past. Now, Gold Hill was frankly a cow town. It had no other reason for being. The wide dusty main street, the false fronts of the stores and saloons, the hitch racks in front of them, the sleepy ponies drowsing there, an occasional cow-puncher rolling down the plank sidewalk, all proclaimed the town what it was, a trading centre for the ranch country. From Stinking Creek, from Squaw Creek, from the hill country to the east, from the wide stretch of plains below, brown-faced men and women rode or drove in to trade here.

Gold Hill was on the other side of the range from the Bar X Y, and it happened that Jim Turner had never come this far from the ranch on his holidays. The place was strange to him. He had ridden there now on a mission from the boss, to bring a letter and to take back an answer.

Passing down the business street, Jim took stock of the town. It was not a large place, but it had the air of a live trading centre. The number of saloons and gambling houses showed that.

A sign above a large store caught his eye. The legend on it was:

EDWARD SLOAN  
GENERAL MERCHANDISE  
AND  
HARDWARE

Almost involuntarily, Jim pulled up his horse. Edward Sloan! The man whose name was in Homer Tedrow's book. Vague thrusts of memory began to knit themselves together. Sometime, in that drifting, varied childhood of his, he had been in this town. He knew it now. That corner store with its long false front, set at an angle in such a way as to half face two streets, was somehow familiar to him. He recalled, thinly, sitting on a box on the porch and eating crackers and cheese while he waited for someone to come and get him. And there his memory halted. It would not for the moment function further. The picture faded out.

As he sat there, groping for clues, a man came down the street. He bore himself with an air, a manner at once graceful and pretentious. A young woman moved toward him. His hat came off in a low bow, showing a fine head of silvery hair. Instantly his eyes lit. He stopped the woman to pay her a fulsome compliment, and while he talked with her, he held the hat in his hand. He smirked, his suavity oily as butter. Apparently, this beau might be described as the well-preserved residue of what had once been a very handsome man.

Jim's heart tightened. Some peculiarity of gait, of gesture, carried him across the years. He glimpsed a picture

of himself, a shrinking little wretch, in the act of being horse-whipped by this brute. For the man was his father, the fake Indian doctor from whom he had run away when he was a little chap and whom he had never seen since.

The blood drained from the young man's face. Again he felt the sickness of hate. This man, Custer Turner, had been an unnatural father to him and a brutal husband to the lad's mother. The boy had known what it was to be beaten cruelly, to be starved, to be made the victim of Custer Turner's drunken rages. He owed the man no kindness, no gratitude. It shamed him to think he should be the son of such a man. Memories flooded back on him, detached and inconsequent ones, of the faker's vanity, his poses, his suave benignity of manner and his callous selfishness of heart.

Without lifting his eyes toward Jim, he gallantly escorted the young woman into the store, hat still off, bowing and strutting until he was out of sight.

Jim rode on, his mind full of what he had just seen. He had forgotten the man's ways, even his appearance, forgotten he had been a rakish "lady-killer," that his dark, long-lashed eyes and deferential manner, his boldness and his gaiety, had brought him many conquests. It was the thing he had been most proud of, this ability to bend women to his will. Once won, he could be hard enough to them. Jim remembered his mother's tears—though he could recall her only as a vague phantom of sweetness and beauty—and he set his teeth.

In front of the Legal Tender gambling house and saloon, Jim started to swing from the saddle. Before his foot touched the ground, his attention was attracted by the sound of an uproar inside the place. He knew, of course, what it was. A fracas of some kind had started. He dismounted and tied his horse to the hitch rack by a slip knot.

The sounds continued. Suddenly, the door crashed open. A man's body came flying through to the street as though flung out of a catapult. It landed in a thick dust close to the front feet of the horses tied to the hitch rack, and lay there like a sack of meal. A man's big body filled the doorway and stood there blustering and threatening. Jim recognized it as that of Black Tom Truesdale.

A harsh command issued from the mouth of the bad man.

"Padlock yore tongue!"

Black Tom stood straddling there, frowning down at the tumbled heap in the dust. Then, with a curious snort of laughter, he swung around and went back into the gambling hall. Preoccupied with the man he had ejected, Truesdale had not observed Jim except as a piece of detail on the landscape. For which inattention Jim was profoundly grateful. When Mr. Truesdale was in the vicinity, he preferred to be inconspicuous.

Slowly, the bundle of clothes upraised itself from the dust. Its inhabitant sat up but did not rise. A wrinkled winter-pippin face turned apprehensively toward the door.

"Well, I'll be teetotally dummed," its owner said in mild protest. Then, catching sight of Jim, a painful gleam of humour touched the pale eyes. "Say, did you see him fling me out?"

Young Turner admitted that he had.

"I liked to of never lit."

Jim asked politely what the trouble had been.

"Nothin'! Nothin' a-tall," the little man murmured. He had a sort of perpetual lost-dog expression on his face, as though he were apologizing for being alive. "I jes' happened to say to Jack Harding that Cus Turner hadn't ought to be in such a heluva hurry to take over Ed Sloan's property. An' Tom he right away got mad an' bunged me one on

the nose. He stood me on my head and knocked me around something scandalous. If you can tell me what it was all about, you'll oblige, stranger." The little man looked up at him pathetically.

"Search me," Jim said.

"I sure did get awful tired of him before he quit slammin' me around, but maybeso I'm lucky at that. He might of got a notion to plug me instead of mopping the floor up with me."

Two names used by the little man had stuck in Jim's mind.

"What was it you said?"

"I didn't mean a thing, not a doggone thing. What I said was that it seemed like Cus Turner might wait an' see if they was any other heirs. I clean forgot that Cus and Tom are thick as three in a bed."

"How do you mean take over Sloan's property?" asked Jim.

"Why, as the heir, of course. His wife was Sloan's sister. So they say. I dunno."

"Oh, he's married, is he?"

"No. His wife was deceased a right long time since. Tha's what they say." The man sitting in the dust spoke with comical dignity. "Dad gum my hide, Tom pretty near stove me up the way he lammed me around. Likely he's bust two-three of my ribs, don't you reckon?"

"Better get up and see."

"Why, yes, I reckon I will."

He rose gingerly, testing out first one leg then the other, feeling his arms, his sides, and his stomach.

"You all right?"

"It ain't his fault I am," the little man said in an ag-grieved voice. "He hadn't ought to be so rambunctious. He's one fightin' fool, though I'd hate to say so anywheres round him." He dusted his jean trousers with his hand.

"You're lucky it's no worse."

"Sure am. By jiminy, my hat's in the Legal Tender. It fell off whilst he was jouncing me around. Would you like to go in and get it, young fellow?"

"No, I don't think I would," Jim said frankly.

"Well, tha's all right. Tim will hang it on a hook till I call for it."

Already Jim's mind was busy with another aspect of the situation. It was not functioning in definite thoughts, but it was lightened by flashes which later would connect themselves coherently.

"So the idea is that Custer Turner inherits through his wife. That it?"

"Yep."

"And has Sloan left much?"

The little man stared. "Where you come from, young fellow? I thought everyone knew that Ed Sloan was the richest man in seventeen counties. Hell! He owned every damned thing that wasn't nailed down—ranches, stock, store, mortgages, cash."

"And it all goes to Turner?"

"Seems like. I'm satisfied. I got no more kick comin'. That's a cinch." The little man turned toward the cow-puncher, suspicion in his eye. He was one of the sort who locks the stable after the horse is stolen. "Mind, I ain't sayin' a thing against Tom, not a thing. He's got a right to rare around as much as he pleases, far as I'm concerned. An' I ain't sayin' he can't lam me around when he's a mind to. Anyways, I'm not makin' any roar about it."

Jim laughed. "I'll not tell him what you said, if that's what's eatin' you."

"Well, I claim I ain't said anything. See?"

"Yep, I see."

The ejected man looked round, not quite at his ease. "Say, Tom might take a notion to come chargin' out again. Let's hit the trail for somewheres else."

"Suits me," agreed Jim.

As they walked away the little man introduced himself. "Meet Sim Cole."

"My name is Jim Turner," the other said.

Sim Cole started. "Say, you're no kin to Cus, are you?" he asked apprehensively.

Jim promptly evaded. "I should say not."

Sim Cole began to fear that he had put his foot into it again. Loquacity was his failing. He could not help talking when silence was indicated as a better policy. He talked, not because he had any strong or settled convictions to air, but because he liked the sound of his own voice. Since he did not want to be "jounced" again he began to cover his tracks.

"Understand. It suits me fine to have Cus Turner get whatever he's a mind to. I got no kick comin' whatsoever."

Jim grinned. "Forget yore worries, Mr. Cole, if all you got to worry about is me shootin' off my mouth about what you've said. A clam hasn't got a thing on me. Say, when did this Edward Sloan die?"

"About two-three weeks ago, more or less. Come to think of it, I feel kinda thirsty after the jouncin' up I got. Let's trail over to the Best Bet an' get a snifter."

Jim assented absently. His mind had marched one step farther forward. Custer Turner was probably not the legal heir of Sloan at all. Jim knew that his mother's maiden name had been Sloan. If Turner's wife had been the sister of Edward Sloan, would her son not be the rightful heir?

This startled Jim. If his mind was tracking in the right direction, there was a chance that he himself, Jim Turner,



was the rightful owner of the ranches, cattle, store, and other property left by Sloan.

"Who did Sloan leave his property to?"

"They say he didn't leave any will. Died intestate." The little man gave the word sonorously.

"Un—which?"

"Without airy will. Cus naturally claims as next of kin."

Jim nodded thoughtfully. "I see."

## CHAPTER XXII

### TWO SCOUNDRELS IN CONFERENCE

JIM felt keenly his inexperience. He had had no business training beyond such necessary details as the buying of a pair of boots or a new shirt. In such an emergency as this he supposed he ought to go to a lawyer. But he had enough native sagacity to know that he must be very careful in the selection of one. There was probably only one attorney in Gold Hill; at most there would be two. It was altogether likely that Custer Turner, if he were attempting anything contrary to the law, any chicanery, had retained in his interest the local lawyer or lawyers. To go to such a man with his case would be to play into the hands of Turner by warning him what to expect and giving him an opportunity to prepare for it.

The law of inheritance and the statutes governing it in the territory were quite unknown to Jim. He had a hazy idea that, if Sloan had left no will, a nephew would be held by the court nearer of kin than a brother-in-law, but he was not even sure of that.

The one thing of which he was definitely sure was that it would be a mistake to present his claim prematurely, without the advice of a good lawyer and under the proper conditions. If Black Tom Truesdale was allied with Custer Turner to get the Sloan property, he would not hesitate at all to remove any rival claimant from the path in case the latter stood in his way.

Yes, he must go slow, Jim realized that. His boss, Walter K. Trapper, owner of the Bar X Y, had a long head and could be trusted. Jim decided to have a talk with him before he did anything at all about the matter.

But he did not see any objection, since he was in town, to picking up what information he could in the rôle of a casual outsider. Cole was garrulous. Whatever the old man knew he would tell. All one had to do was to switch on his speech. His talk would flow on like water running out of a bottle. He wished now that he had not mentioned his name to Cole. The gossipy little man might fall to talking, and if Custer Turner learned there was a young man of the same name as himself in town, he might suspect who he was. Jim did not, however, ask Sim not to mention his name. That would be to stress a circumstance he wanted the old man to forget. It would give the matter an importance in Sim's mind which Jim did not want it to have.

"See you later," he told Sim. "At the Silver Dollar. Gotta buy some stuff. Be there in an hour, say. So long."

It had occurred to Jim that, since he had some purchases to make, he might as well make them in the Sloan store. At any rate, he could have a look around and see what the place looked like. There would not be much chance of Custer Turner recognizing him.

Jim lounged along the boardwalk and turned in at the doorway of the store. He could see that it had a large and varied stock, one well equipped to supply the needs of the country round about. From the appearance of the shelves, there was probably very little in the way of dead stock on them. Hardware, leather goods, clothing, dress goods, canned fruit and vegetables, groceries: all of them were on display, both fancy goods and plain. Clearly, Sloan had known his business as a merchant. Long experience had taught him what

was and what was not in demand among his customers. No smooth salesman could have palmed off on him anything not suited to his trade. So, at least, Jim guessed after a swift eye-inventory of the stock.

Three or four clerks were busy waiting on customers, two of whom were ranch women come to town with their husbands to renew supplies. They were buying goods from the lists they carried, crossing each item out with a pencil as the clerks added the article to the growing pile on the counter.

A clerk glanced up at Jim. "One of us will be at liberty soon," he told the young man.

"No hurry," Jim said. He strolled back toward the rear of the store and fell to examining saddles.

From where he stood, Jim could see that there were two men in the office, which was a room partitioned off from the main store, the upper half of the inner walls being of glass. The man at the desk was Custer Turner—it was curious, but even in his own mind Jim never thought of the man as his father, as one with whom he had any relationship whatever. The other man sat with his back to Jim, close to the desk, but in such a position that the big drum stove hid most of his figure.

The two talked in low tones. The murmur of their voices was quite plain, but the words did not reach Jim. Even in the drone of their indistinguishable speech the individuality of the two found expression: the one murmur smooth, urbane, and unctuous, the other rough and harsh. Presently, the heavy voice lifted, overriding opposition: "Tell you it'll be like I say."

Custer Turner laid a placating hand on the man's arm. He, too, spoke louder, but with oily cajolery. "Certainly, cer-

tainly! Whatever you say, Tom. You know best. The point is to make sure of the girl."

Jim had not heard that rich and mellow voice in a dozen years, but instantly he reacted to the sound of it. He had heard it under gas flares in the streets luring dollars out of the pockets of rubes, at church socials, in saloons, and in their own rooms, though then with quite another manner and inflection. It was a voice capable of many modulations, that of a man with a native gift for effective oratory.

The other man banged a heavy fist down on the desk. "My business that," he rasped. "Forget it. When I whistle, she'll come."

That was all Jim heard. Custer Turner's voice dropped again to a confidential murmur and the other to a rough growl. Presently, there came the sound of a chair being pushed back. A man came to the door of the office and turned to say a last word to the one left inside.

The young cow-puncher moved forward to the other wall, not hastily, but as though the canned goods on display had caught his interest. He did not turn his head while the man strode from the office to the street. There was a good and sufficient reason for this. He had caught a glimpse of the owner of the bass voice, and he did not care to be recognized. The man was Black Tom Truesdale.

"What can we do for you, young man?"

Jim did not turn instantly. The rich and amiable condescension of that voice sent a chill up and down his spine. It was not fear, yet there was the memory of fear in it, too, together with hatred and defiance, a resurgence of the emotions of old, when he had set his childish will to match that of this bully who tortured women and children. How often had his young will measured itself against this man's, to

bring him cruel floggings and stinging jeers! Therefore, he waited a moment now to get control of himself before he turned.

Custer Turner did not recognize him. He saw that at once. To the older man, he was merely any one of a hundred young cow-punchers who drifted into the store for tobacco and boots and airtights.

Jim bought what he needed and left with his purchases. Custer Turner himself waited on him, always with that touch of courtly condescension which suggested the giving of a favour. It was curious, but at first Jim had had to fight against submission to domination by the other just as he had done as a child. The feeling had not lasted long, and Jim knew that he had conquered the impulse permanently. Custer Turner could not lash him with a horsewhip now if he did not obey.

There came back to Jim's mind the snatch of conversation he had heard between the two men. What nefarious scheme were these two men pursuing in common? To what girl had they referred when Black Tom said she would come when he whistled? The boy's thoughts jumped back to the scene in Homer Tedrow's cabin, to what Pattie had said about Black Tom and Sue. Was it Sue Tedrow, then, of whom Truesdale was to make sure, of whom he claimed he was already sure? Jim was convinced of it. He had seen for himself that she feared him. With no protector, except her unworldly, ineffective father, what chance would she have of escape from him?

Jim could give no logical reason for his assurance that Sue Tedrow was the girl they meant. Why should Custer Turner be interested in a girl buried on a hill ranch so far from civilization? If Truesdale fancied her and wanted to marry her, that was one thing. But why discuss it with Custer

Turner, as though she were a factor in some intrigue they were working out together? It would be much more like Black Tom to play a lone hand, neither to ask nor to take anybody's advice.

Perhaps, after all, they had not been talking of Sue Tedrow -and yet Jim felt sure that they had.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### A QUIRT SINGS

**J**IM put through the business with which Trapper had entrusted him. It was the delivery of a letter to Lieutenant Jack Lawrence of the territorial rangers.

Lawrence was a brown, slim-waisted, indolent young man, strikingly handsome. His dark-eyed insouciance suggested effeminacy, but the cut of the chin and the set of the mouth contradicted this. He took the letter and read it without rising from the chair in which he was lounging, after first motioning the messenger to a seat.

The eyes he lifted to those of Jim were searching in their gaze. "Your name Turner?" he asked.

The young man admitted identity.

Lieutenant Lawrence called to the other man in the office. He was a tall, thin, soldierly man, busy copying some records into a book.

"Meet Sergeant Frost. Sergeant, this is Mr. Turner from the Bar X Y."

The sergeant put aside his work and came forward to acknowledge the introduction. Jim did not afterward quite remember how it came to pass, but he found the conversation had presently been shifted to his recent experience in Lost Park. The lieutenant asked questions, many of them. Some of these Jim answered frankly, some guardedly, some he evaded. He wanted to assist any inquiry into the death of Hal, but he did not intend to involve the Henrys in trouble with the law.

The inquiries of Lawrence were made rather casually. The heel of one boot was hooked in the rung of the tilted chair. He smoked lazily. If he was not satisfied fully with the replies of the young cow-puncher, he gave no evidence of this. His questions were so incisive that no doubt he arrived at a deduction approximating the truth—the range-rider's willingness to tell anything he knew provided it could not injure Hughes Henry.

"Understand," explained Jim, "Hughes Henry is straight as a string. Marshall is a bad lot. So is Black Tom. But not Henry."

"I'm glad to hear your opinion," the ranger said.

"Another thing. I'm not lookin' for trouble. I'm duckin' it whenever I can. Far as Truesdale goes, I hope I never lay eyes on him again. But that Marshall—different. He killed my friend. He tried three times to kill me. I aim to get him."

"No way to talk," reproved the officer. "The law will get him in good time."

"Not if I get to him first," Jim said obstinately.

Whereupon the other read him a smiling little lecture on law and order.

After a time, Lawrence let down the front legs of the chair and got to his feet. Jim noticed that all his motions were light, easy, and effortless.

"Like to see you again before you go back to the ranch, Mr. Turner. May something come up I've forgotten." The officer smiled, and the warmth of that smile was a letter of recommendation.

Jim did not remember ever having been so drawn to a man in such a short time. The lieutenant had the charm of personal magnetism.

From the office of the rangers, Jim wandered down the

street to the Silver Dollar. It was not often that he got to any town and he was eager to plunge into the excitement offered. Gold Hill had in its days been a wild town, a sink into which the dregs of humanity had sifted along with many quiet and law-abiding people. It was still a place untamed. Cow-punchers came in on their occasional sprees to rip its peace wide open. Bad characters, though not so many, still infested it. Jim knew its reputation and he had no intention of letting himself become more than an inconspicuous unit of the many pleasure-seekers.

The range-rider dropped into the Silver Dollar a little shyly. His self-consciousness was unnecessary. Nobody paid the least attention to him. The dance and gambling hall was a large one, and even now, though darkness had not fallen, there were a great many patrons present.

Jim played the wheel a little, drank a little, and watched a table of stud poker. There was a game of faro going, and he heard somebody mention Mexican monte. The dancing would not begin until evening. Since Jim did not dance, he did not mind this. He was still at the hobbledehoy age with women, and though he attended ranch dances, it was not to take part in the quadrilles and polkas, but to watch from the safety of the door the daring adventurers who went upon the floor. He would have liked to be a gay and fluent squire of dames, but his conversation was usually limited to "Yes'm!" and "No, ma'am!"

The numbers inside the gambling house increased. Presently a voice hailed Jim by name. He turned. Little Sim Cole was beaming on him.

"What say we have a li'l' snifter, pardner?" the old man asked.

Jim did not care for a drink, but he did not want to repulse the old gossip's friendliness. He looked for a table and sat

down. As he did so, he observed two khaki-clad figures at the next table. The one nearest to him carried a quirt in his hand. The man was Lieutenant Lawrence. The officers continued talking quietly to each other and paid no attention to Jim. He was not even sure that they had noticed him.

Then came another noisy eruption of patrons through the swing doors at the front. For some reason, the coming of this new group produced a ripple of excitement in the house. Jim rose to see who they were, but from where he stood could not get a view of them. Presently a whisper reached him. The newcomers were Black Tom Truesdale, Sam Marshall, and Tige Ball. So the whisper said.

Truesdale's group moved slowly toward the back of the room, after first stopping at the bar for a drink. Jim could hear voices greeting one and the other of them. A shift in the crowd showed him the face of one of the advancing men. It was that of Custer Turner. Then he heard Marshall's loud voice. It was thick and bullying. Evidently he had been drinking a good deal.

Jim considered swiftly what he had better do. He had no wish to meet any of these men here, certainly not all of them together. But there was no escape, except by the front door, and to reach it he would have to pass their group. He decided it would be better to push back his chair, pull down his hat, and trust to the chance that he would not be seen.

In their progress through the gambling hall the quartette moved closer. They came to a halt so close to him that in the jam of people Truesdale pressed against his legs. Jim scarcely breathed, lest he draw the man's attention to him. Truesdale turned to see whom he was pushing.

An exclamation of surprise escaped him in the form of a growl of resentment. "You—here!"

At the same moment, Marshall caught sight of young Turner. He let out a yelp of rage.

Truesdale stepped back, extending his strong arms so as to sweep back those who in pressing forward to see might get between Marshall and his prey.

"Give 'em room," he ordered.

There came that instant of shocked apprehension which fills a room when the bell is rung for danger; that moment when men feel their hearts beating like captive live creatures struggling to escape. The timid looked toward the door. Wise men drew back quietly and made themselves small.

For once Jim had the advantage. He had foreseen the possibility of an encounter. His fingers were hovering close to the butt of the gun which was holstered in front of his leather chaps. Now, as he rose to his feet, he whipped it out.

But, quick as he had been, others were quicker. Strong fingers closed on his hand and flung his arm floorward. A lithe, pantherish figure flashed past and a quirt sang through the air. Its lash caught and twisted itself around the wrist of Marshall. The revolver he had drawn fell clattering to the floor. Lawrence was on it like a cat after a rat.

Marshall cursed savagely, snatching at his wrist to assuage the pain.

"Goddlemighty! What's eatin' you?" he yelled.

The ranger lieutenant had him covered with his own weapon, and not only him but the others of his party.

Truesdale was the first to find his voice. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded roughly.

The ranger's answer was crisp. It carried the ring of authority. "We're the law, sir. No gun plays go."

"The law! What the devil you mean? Claim you're a sheriff?"

"Rangers," returned the other evenly. His voice was

very mild, his manner not provocative. But the blue eyes that met the angry ones of Black Tom were steady as steel.

Truesdale hung in the wind a moment, uncertain whether to fling discretion away. If this had been his own quarrel, he would have instantly reached for his Colt's and called for a showdown. But it was Marshall's funeral, as the current phrase put it. Should he or should he not carry through?

The suave voice of Custer Turner murmured in his ear. It is to be presumed that gentleman did not want to see their apple cart upset by a mix-up with these rangers who of late had become so important in subjugating outlaws and desperadoes in the territory.

Black Tom heard the whisper sullenly. The light eyes in the dark face of the killer were still bleak, but his mind recognized the justice of what Turner had said. It chanced that Truesdale was sober and, therefore, not on edge for trouble. He knew the reputation of the rangers. He might kill either or both of these men. Personally, he had no doubt that he could. But what would it profit him? In their place would come four or six more, and if he destroyed them, still others would come seeking him, till in the end they would get him. He could not fight the whole force single-handed.

He answered Lawrence with a sneer: "I've heard about you birds, an' don't think much of you."

The lieutenant was brisk, impersonal. "Sorry. Got to stop this gun stuff. Instructions from headquarters."

"Runnin' a Sunday school?" jeered the killer.

The ranger spoke to Jim, not to Truesdale: "Better get out of town, young fellow."

"Yes," agreed Jim. He had just grazed disaster, and he knew it. The rangers had saved his life. For if he had killed Marshall—and he felt sure of that, sure that he would have—Black Tom would have dropped him in his tracks.

"Wait!" It was Truesdale speaking. "You, Turner, or whatever you call yourself, get off my range. Hear me? Git off an' stay off." The bad man made a gesture of the hand that swept the young fellow off the map, metaphorically.

Custer Turner touched his arm. "What did you call him, Tom?"

"Turner. He calls himself Turner, same as you."

The ex-medicine man lost a little of his manner of bland superiority. "Your first name, young man?" he asked.

"James."

"Mother's first name?"

"Sarah."

Custer Turner asked no more questions. His florid face lost colour, as though he had received an unexpected shock. He drew back, momentarily stunned. With this look, too, went a flash of furious baffled hatred at Jim.

"Better come out of here with me," the officer said to Jim. "I'll see you get started."

"Yes," agreed the young man again. "I'm sure much obliged to both of you. And you'll notice I didn't start the trouble. He's bad, this fellow Marshall. Not the first time he's tried to bump me off."

Lieutenant Lawrence walked out of the gambling house with Jim, apparently to start him out of town. They moved together toward the corral where Jim had taken his horse. It was the same place where the rangers kept their mounts. Lawrence roped and saddled a horse.

"I'll ride along with you for a ways," he said.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### JIM TELLS HIS STORY

**T**HE two young men rode knee to knee in silence out past the scattered houses in the suburb of Gold Hill, past the barbed-wire fence of a pasture, and into the open country beyond.

Lawrence was the first to speak, and when he did it was with a chuckle of mirth.

"Young fellow, for a man who isn't looking for trouble, who is ducking it whenever he can, you certainly have a knack of bumping into it. Seems to me you make a new enemy every time you take a walk. Marshall—Truesdale—and now this man Turner."

"I know," Jim began defensively, his forehead twisted to a puzzled frown. "I can't somehow seem to help it. I never did before—not till lately. Like I done told you, I'm no trouble-hunter. I'll be dad gummed if I know what's wrong with me nowadays."

"You're getting in the way of some of these nice law-abiding citizens," the ranger said with an ironic smile. "That's what is wrong with you."

"Yes, but——"

"And, boy, listen!" Lawrence had become serious. "You be careful about riding out alone. Stay near the ranch and don't follow any lone trails. You've got three dangerous enemies, and not one of them would stop at murder to get rid of you."

"Sure, I'll be careful," Jim promised.

"Something funny about the way that fellow Custer Turner woke up when he heard your name," the officer said, thinking aloud. "It gave him a shock."

"He's my father," Jim said reluctantly.

"Your father!" The officer was more than surprised.

"Yep. An' he hates me."

"But—why? If he's your father——"

"It's a long story. Wanta hear it?"

"Yes."

Jim told him at length the history of his life as far as he could remember it.

Lawrence made one comment: "That explains why Custer Turner looked as though he had seen a ghost when he found out who you were. It struck him all in a heap that if you proved yourself Sloan's nephew, you would cut him out of the property. If looks could kill, you would have fallen dead right then."

"He always hated me, an' I always hated him," Jim said.

"That's a horrible thing to say about your father, boy."

"I can't help it. He ruined my mother's life. Why should I pretend I don't resent it? If I can cut him outa this money, I sure will."

"You want to be pretty careful. He knows who you are. If he is as bad as you say, he'll make trouble for you somehow."

"What I don't get is where Black Tom is in on this thing. But he is. They're as thick as three in a bed." And Jim told what he had heard in the Sloan store.

The ranger shook his head. "I don't understand how this girl could have anything to do with the Sloan estate. You didn't have a sister, did you?"

Jim shook his head. "No. We travelled alone, the three

or us. I recollect, away back, a little baby girl. But maybe it belonged to some neighbour. I was so little at the time."

"Maybe Sloan had another sister or a brother," suggested the lieutenant. "I'll set some inquiries on foot, if you like."

"Wish you would. I've got to go back to the ranch to-day. Mighty good of you to take the trouble."

Lawrence did not explain to his new acquaintance that he had been sent to Gold Hill to check up on the activities of a certain lawless few who made the place their headquarters. A stage had been held up a few weeks before. Horses had been stolen, cattle rustled. There had been at least one unexplained murder. Those in authority had decided it was time for a clean-up, and the lieutenant had been sent to survey the ground and get the preliminary evidence. The opinion of the ranger was that there was an organized band operating probably from Lost Park as a hole-up. But, as he would have put it himself, he lived under his own hat. It was his business to find out what he could and to say little. Therefore, he did not tell the cow-puncher why he was interested in his affairs.

As for Jim, he was still young enough for hero-worship. This young man's clear-eyed, competent virility, his indolent and graceful swiftness of energy, had won the boy's whole-hearted admiration. Never had he seen anything to equal the way in which he had, with a quirt as a weapon, disarmed Marshall, and, subsequently, with three soft-spoken sentences made innocuous the anger of the dreaded Black Tom. This was a man to trust, a leader to follow. Jim wished that he, too, was a ranger. Impulsively, he said so.

Lieutenant Lawrence did not answer immediately. When he did so, he spoke with caution. "We're short of men—need some good ones. But it's a tough job, and we expect those who sign up to go through to a finish, to have no per-

sonal friends or enemies, no debts of any kind to pay. You're not in that class—not right now, anyhow. You've got your own interests to serve—in the matter of Sloan's estate, for instance. But there's one thing: I'm not at a liberty to talk—still, I'll say this and expect you to keep it under your hat—I may call on you sooner than you think."

"Well, you send word to the Bar X Y. I'll be there I reckon. If I'm not, Trapper will know where I'm at."

"Why don't you talk over with Trapper this business of the Sloan property? He's a mighty level-headed man. You couldn't do better. Probably he knows a good lawyer. You've got to go slow and play your hand close to your belly."

"I've thought of that. Believe I will," said Jim.

Lawrence drew up his horse. "Reckon I'll be turning back here. Well, so long, Turner."

Jim said his "*Adios!*" and rode on alone.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE BOSS LISTENS

**W**ALTER K. TRAPPER, owner of the 'Bar X Y' ranch, leaned back in a big easy chair, one leg thrown over an arm of it, and listened to young Turner's story. He was a big weather-beaten man, with shrewd eyes, from the corners of which many small lines radiated. His corduroy suit had fallen into wrinkles that seemed to make it somehow fit more perfectly the shape of his big body. He was smoking a black cigar.

"Right interestin' story, Jim," he commented when the boy had finished. "I've heard it two ways about the will—one that Sloan left the estate to Cus Turner, and one that he died without a will. If there's any shenanigan going on, it's likely that Cus has got a forged will ready to pull, if necessary. That shyster lawyer at Gold Hill, Frank Campbell, would fix one up for him. You see, he'd figure there was always a chance you might show up an' claim possession. That's a bridge you can cross when you come to it. First thing is to prove that you're Sloan's nephew. What's yore evidence?"

"My name is the same as this Custer Turner, an' soon as I saw him, I recognized him right away."

"I don't doubt you're his son, but yore say-so won't be enough. What documents have you got? What marks of identification on you?"

"I have my mother's ring an' a letter she wrote when I

was a little fellow oncet when she had to be away for some days. When I ran away, I brought 'em along with me."

He produced the ring and the letter and handed them to his employer. The ring was a plain band wedding ring; the letter had been read so often that at the folds it was almost ready to fall apart.

"Something written inside the ring. My eyes ain't what they were," Trapper said, trying to decipher some initials.

"Initials," Jim explained. He wrote on a slip of paper and pushed it across the table to the older man.

Trapper read on it: S. S.—H. M.

"The 'S. S.' stands for Sarah Sloan. I don't get that 'H. M.' I've always heard him called Custer Turner," said Jim.

"Maybe Cus is a nickname." Trapper was glancing the letter over. He read:

DEAREST LITTLE JIMMIE BOY:

You will be three years old to-morrow. My, what a big man! Too big to be naughty and trouble Cammy. If you are good, dearest treasure, Cammy will give you a little present from mother, who loves you very much and will be back very soon. Oh, heaps and heaps of hugs and kisses.

Your mother,  
SARAH TURNER.

"Good, far as it goes," pronounced Trapper. "Question is, can you prove you're the Jimmie boy in the letter? Who is this Cammy?"

"I don't know."

"If you had the original envelope so you could see where it had been addressed to——"

"It musta wore out long ago, if I ever had it."

"Pass that, then. Come back to the personal identification. I can swear you showed up here when you were a kid

an' that I've known you ever since. But I don't go back far enough."

"You spoke about marks awhile ago. I've got two scars on me. One is on my right leg. I don't know how it come there. But I've got one on my forearm where Turner cut me with a knife by accident. He was a knife-thrower in the street show he ran. That night he was drunk and the blade went through my flesh."

Jim pulled up the shirt sleeve on his right arm and showed a scar.

"Where was it he did that? What town?"

"Don't know. We were always movin' from one town to another."

"Hmp! Yore evidence all fades out before it gits anywhere, boy. Do you remember anybody who knew you in those days?"

"No."

Trapper blew out fat smoke rings, his eyes fixed in thought. "You'll have a tough row to hoe, boy. I don't doubt yore story for a minute. But I'm not the judge an' jury. They'll want evidence, an' plenty of it. We've got to dig it up somewheres. Must be someone who knew you. Course, we could advertise, but if we did that we give it away to Cus Turner that we're on his trail. No, that won't do. Still, I know a fellow who will do a little private sleuthing for me. Better leave yore ring an' letter here in my safe."

"Yes," agreed Jim.

"What I don't get is where Black Tom comes into the story—if he does. And this Sue Tedrow. Maybe if we could get at her father, he could tell us something that would set us on the track. It's a long shot. Still, that's the sort we've got to play."

"Black Tom has got him an' his daughter buffaloed. It's



a darned shame. They're nice folks, but scared to death of him. He won't let another man beside himself show up at the Tedrow place. He sure enough aims to marry her, whether she wants to or not, Pattie Hughes says."

"This country wouldn't miss Black Tom a whole lot if someone bumped him off," Trapper said grimly.

"Not many people lookin' for the job, I reckon," Jim said. "He's sudden death with a gun. I'm like all the others. I sidestepped an' was mighty meek when I had a chance. He ran on me rough, an' I took it like a sheep-herder."

"You would have been mighty foolish if you hadn't."

Jim's eyes lit with an eager glow. "But I sure saw one fellow stand up to him an' face him down—that Lieutenant Lawrence you gave me the letter to at Gold Hill. He stood there quiet an' easy in the Silver Dollar an' told Black Tom—an' Sam Marshall an' Tige Ball an' Cus Turner, too, for that matter—where to head in at. By gorry, they did, too, every last one of 'em."

Trapper called for a detailed account of the adventure, and Jim gave it with enthusiasm. The cattleman slapped his thigh gleefully so that the dust flew.

"It's the beginning of the end, begad," he cried. "First round for Lawrence. He may not do the trick. They'll likely get him, but if they do the rangers will come in an' make a clean-up for fair."

"I'm not so sure they'll get him," Jim differed. "He was that quick, an' yet so cool an' easy, you never saw the beat of it. If you'd been there yourself, you'd say he's one sure-enough man!"

"Not doubtin' it a minute. But you've got to remember he took 'em by surprise. Black Tom didn't know what else to do. He had a leetle too much sense to kill an officer of rangers over nothing. That particular situation won't hap-

pen again. Unless yore friend Lawrence is prepared to shoot first an' explain afterward, why he'll last about as long with Black Tom as a snowball in hades."

"I sure hope you're a bad guesser. I like Lawrence." Jim reverted to the plan of campaign. "I've got a hunch that it's up in Lost Park where I can get evidence about this Sloan estate. Truesdale knows something. Maybe Homer Tedrow does, too, like you say. If you could spare me after the calf round-up——"

"I spared you once before—you an' Hal both. No, sir! I won't have any such business happen again. You can stay right here where you're safe," the cattleman told Jim with blunt dogmatism.

Jim knew it would be useless to argue the point, but he had a private opinion about that. After the calf round-up, he would slip away without asking permission.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### JIM RIDES

**C**ATTLELAND at its busiest! The round-up, temporarily at the mouth of Sugarloaf Gulch, was branding calves. The bawling of excited cows, the blatting of frightened calves, brought into the sharp consciousness of sudden pain, the crisp orders of men on horseback, and the smothered occasional curses or light laughter of sweating men on foot! Heat waves from a piñon fire beating up into the hot, dry air. Figures in leather chaps moving in clouds of dust which caked the throat and made voices hoarse and harsh. The pungent odour of burnt flesh and hair and the smoke of the branding iron.

Upon these sights, sounds, and smells rode Jack Lawrence. He drew up outside the cordon of riders who fenced the milling and disturbed cattle. From a puncher sitting at ease in his saddle, weight resting on one stirrup and on the tree, he learned that Trapper was master of the rodeo. To him at once the ranger went.

"Mornin', Mr. Trapper," he said. "I'm Lawrence of the rangers. Got your letter the other day. Mighty glad to learn what you told me. If we're going to clean up this country, we need all the good citizens on our side."

Trapper shook hands, looking straight at this young man of whom he had heard so good a report. What he saw he liked.

"I aim to be a good citizen," he said, "an' it's to my in-

terest. I want these horse and cattle thieves rounded up. It's time Arizona grew up an' quit hellin' around."

"Good. Well, I'm here on business," the ranger smiled. "First off, can I see your rider, Jim Turner, for a minute?"

"He's ropin' calves. I'll get him." Trapper motioned to one of the riders forming the cordon around the herd, and after the man had ridden forward, gave him instructions. "Send Jim Turner to me, Mac. You stay an' rope in his place."

Jim came out from the dust and stew of the branding. His throat was like a lime kiln from swallowing alkali powder. He brushed with the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt a perspiring face. Cords stood out on his brown forearms.

"'Lo," he grinned at the ranger.

Lawrence spoke up with no preliminaries. "I told you I might need you soon, Jim. Well, I do. Right now—to-day."

The cow-puncher looked doubtfully at his employer.

"What's up?" Trapper asked.

"The S. W. & A. Flyer was robbed last night. The robbers got away with about fifteen or twenty thousand after killing the express messenger."

"Robbed—the Flyer! Where?" said the ranchman.

"Near Windy Point. Thirty miles west of Gold Hill. Sheriff Lutz 'phoned me in the night. He happened to know I was at Mesa Verde. From what he says, looks like the bandits are heading for Lost Park. They swung south of the railroad and rode parallel to it along Sunk Creek. One of the men or horses was wounded. The sheriff saw blood on the track."

"But Lost Park is north."

"Yes. They recrossed the track about five miles up and struck a bee line north. Their idea was to fool the pursuit

into thinking they were headed for the border, when they started south. Lutz says there's no doubt but that they doubled back through the mesquite."

"What makes you think it's the Lost Park gang?" asked the owner of the Bar X Y.

"Their kind of job. Nervy and thorough. We're only guessing, of course. I want Jim because he knows the way into the park. We're going in after them."

Jim hesitated. "Just who do you figure did this?"

"Don't know. I've got a guess, but it may be wide of the mark."

"I won't do a thing to hurt Hughes Henry," Jim said bluntly. "Not a thing. If I thought it would bring him harm, I wouldn't go a foot of the way with you."

"Thought you told me Hughes was absolutely straight," his employer said drily.

"He is, too."

"Then you don't need to worry about hurting him," the ranger said. "We'll not hang this on anybody that didn't do it."

"That's all right, but——"

"Spit it out, boy. What is it?"

Jim did not quite know how to put it. "We-e-ll, he was my friend, an' all his family. Took me to his house, nursed me, fed me, protected me from Marshall and Truesdale. Saved my life twice. How'll it look to him if I come leadin' a posse into the park?"

"But you say he's not in this," the ranger demurred.

"I know he's not."

"Then your objection won't hold."

"Folks talk about the Henry gang. It's always the Henry gang, because he's the big man in the park. He gets the

blame of all the deviltry that goes on." Jim's voice rose in excitement. "He don't get a square deal, I tell you."

"Then let's give him one," Lawrence suggested. "Let's round up this murdering outfit and show Henry isn't one of 'em. He'll be glad to be set right with the world and have the criminals brought to justice."

"I dunno as he'd be so darned sorry to be shet of Marshall and Truesdale," Jim admitted. "Looks like they been gettin' worse an' he can't control them. But how's he gonna know I'm not workin' against him?"

"He'll know before we finish the job."

Jim was not satisfied. He wanted some explicit assurance that Hughes would be excluded from the drive on the Lost Park outlaws, and this was exactly what Lawrence would not and could not give him. He said something of the kind.

The ranger met the issue squarely. Level eyed, he looked directly at the young cow-puncher. "Let's get this right, Jim. I want the men that pulled off this job. I'm going in to get them—if I can. And I'm not playing any favourite. If Hughes Henry is in this—and I can hang it on him—I'll round him up in the gather with the others. If he's not in it, he's not in any danger of getting into trouble."

"He's not in it. I'd bet my boots on that," Jim said doggedly.

"All right. Then what's troubling you? You said yourself it was coming one of these days to a show-down between Hughes and Truesdale. If we run down these train robbers—and if Marshall and Truesdale are two of them—we eliminate opposition to Henry and do him a service. Also, which was worrying you some, we save this Tedrow girl from Truesdale and help your own private affairs along."

Jim capitulated. His doubts were, after all, a kind of dis-

loyalty to Hughes. Probably he could best serve him by aiding the rangers. "All right, I'll go," he said. "When you want to start?"

"Right damn now," Trapper said. "You got no time to waste." He turned to Lawrence. "You figurin' on meetin' up with Lutz an' his posse?"

"At the Willow Flats on Bear Creek—to-night."

"Want some of us to go along? Glad to trail with you myself."

"No. Not now. Thanks. May need you later."

Jim got his roll of blanket and his .44, roped a fresh horse from the remuda, and joined Lawrence inside of ten minutes.

They struck a road gait and cut across country into the hills.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE MAN HUNTERS

THE ranger and the cow-puncher, riders from their earliest youth, knew better than to tire their mounts by too rapid travel. The horses would have to carry them for days, and speed was not the first requisite. This part of the journey while they were still on the range of the Bar X Y was quite familiar to Jim. He knew its every draw and fold of hill as a teacher does the textbook used by her class. Lawrence was a stranger to this country, and he followed the guidance of the younger man.

"Know this Willow Flats where we're to camp to-night with Lutz's posse?" the officer asked.

"Sure. We combed that country for strays three years ago. It's off our range, but some stock the old man bought from over thataway had drifted back. A rough country, an' from there on gettin' rougher every mile."

They travelled steadily, not as the crow flies, but winding round hills, twisting up draws and gulches, following the shoulders of steep inclines along narrow paths traversed by cattle or the wild life of the desert. Hour after hour, they plodded forward, slowly clipping off the miles that separated them from their destination.

The sun was setting when a stiff climb brought them to a point from which they could look down into a valley narrowing to a point as it rose. A line of bushes, with occasional cottonwoods, showed where Bear Creek ran snake-like to the cañon which gave it an exit to the plains below.

Jim drew up on the hill shoulder and pointed to the right. "The Willow Flats are back of that knoll. Hope the sheriff is ahead of us. I'm sure hungry as a bear after its long sleep."

They dropped down into the valley and followed the creek. The mosquitoes were singing, and as they came into the willows the pests swarmed about them.

On a sandy spit of land at the junction of Bear and Coyote creeks, they found the camp of the posse.

Sheriff Lutz came forward, fighting off mosquitoes as he moved.

"Glad to see you, Lieutenant. Bad business this. Damn these singin' devils. What say we move up from the flats? There's millions of 'em here in these willows! We've not unloaded the packs yet."

"Suits me," agreed Lawrence. "We'd get mighty little sleep here. Yes, it's a bad business. Got a line on 'em yet? Know who did it?"

"No, sir. They came up into the hills. That's all I know. Five or six of 'em, near as we could tell from the tracks and from what the train crew say. Course, they were masked an' weren't identified. But if you ask me——"

Lutz stopped significantly in the middle of the sentence. He had said all that he meant to say.

The sheriff was a big, ungainly Westerner, of German ancestry but American birth. He was red faced and middle aged and heavy set. He wore boots run down at the heels, a shabby, soft gray pinched-in hat, and a faded brown shirt. For three days at least he had not been shaved. His eyes were light blue and hard, his chin salient. One with justice might have guessed him a good frontier sheriff, persistent, honest, and narrow minded. His record was good.

They moved up into the hills for a mile or two. Darkness was falling, and the way they followed was obscure and

rough. The cavalcade struck a boulder field and picked its way laboriously in the dusk, seeing scarcely half a dozen yards ahead of it as it moved. The wind had come up, and with it a cold drizzle that presently turned into a soaking downpour. This, however, was all in the luck of the day.

Lutz dropped back at the farther end of the boulder field to speak with the ranger.

"Reckon we'll have to throw off an' camp right soon, rain or no rain," he said. "Gettin' too dark to travel. Buck Sturgis is ahead. Soon as he finds a place, we'll light."

Finding a place in the darkness was not easy. They wandered about for another twenty minutes before Sturgis shouted back, "Reckon we'll have to throw off here. Looks to me like a fine wet night will be had by all."

His prediction was correct. They lit a fire and prepared supper, sitting around the blaze wrapped in slickers and blankets.

"American plan," Lawrence said, grinning. "Every man go hunt his own hotel. We're all liable to get a room with a bath."

What the others did, Jim did not know, but he, Lawrence, Sturgis, and the sheriff lay on a ledge under an overhanging shelf of rock which partially sheltered them from the steadily downpouring rain. It was cold. The rock floor pushed through his flesh to the bones. A trickle of rain dropped down his neck or on his face. His blankets were wet. Otherwise, Jim had a comfortable bed and rested easily. He slept brokenly, and about four o'clock in the morning awakened quite sure that his stiff, cramped muscles never would again be serviceable.

Jim discovered that Sturgis was sitting up beside him.

"Boy, this yere is a hard world," the deputy sheriff complained humorously. "It's one dawggoned thing after an-

other. Now, whyfor did Hughes Henry and Tom Truesdale go holdin' up the Flyer right before weather like this? It ain't rained hardly a-tall in two months. An' now, dawg my cats, I reckon I never will get warm again. Seems like some folks haven't got no consideration for others. Now, Hughes——"

"Hughes Henry didn't hold up the Flyer," Jim cut in.

"Didn't he? Fellow, you speak right sure. Me, I like Hughes—always did. When we were young fellows, we frolicked around together quite some. But I reckon he's human. The old scout sure used to be." A reminiscent grin wrinkled the leathery face for a moment. "But he's been friendly with a mighty hard lot of citizens for a consid'able spell. Maybe he didn't do it. Maybe again he did."

"I know he didn't. I know him—lived in his house—met his family. He's straight. I don't care what reputation he's got. I know."

"Have it yore own way, boy." Sturgis, sleep being banished, began to talk. He was a grizzled little man with a leathery face in which were set extraordinarily bright eyes. "I rec'lect oncet when Hughes an' me were young fellows we were with a trail-herd outfit an' rode in to Vegas to kick up our heels. It was a sure-enough bad town in those days. Well, that night this Mysterious Dave—you probably have heard of him, for he sure was a bad killer—was at the joint where we drifted in to take a whirl at the li'l' ol' wheel. He got to pickin' on me for some reason. I was only a kid, an' I knew his reputation. He'd kill at the drop of the hat, when he got set for it. He gave me the word to dance, shootin' at my boot heels. You can bet I hit the ceiling, an' no argument with him either, seeing he had the drop on me. Well, Hughes kinda drifted round the billiard table, a cue in his hands. Before you could of winked twice runnin', he'd

shifted the cue an' tapped Mr. Killer on the haid. Right pretty work it was. Mysterious Dave didn't take any interest in the subsequent proceedings till after we had lit out an' left town. Yes, sir, when we frolicked around together, Hughes was a right nice boy, an' it won't hurt my feelings none if you're right about him."

Morning broke still wet, a gray day dripping mournfully beneath a drab sky. The little group of man hunters ate a moist breakfast, packed, saddled, and departed after Lutz, Sturgis, and the ranger had held a short consultation.

"We're going to cut across to the place of an old nester named Tolman," Lawrence told Jim. "No chance of picking up a trail after all the rain, but it seems that the quickest way into the park is past Tolman's place. He may have seen these birds as they went in. Or he may be able to tell us who headed the other way a few days since."

"I know him. I've been at his place. By Gar, they call him. Queer old chap, but I like him. He looked after me when I was sick there," Jim said.

"You don't suppose he's in with Black Tom's gang by any chance?" the ranger asked.

Jim shook his head. "Not likely. He's a kind old fellow, talkative an' friendly. I'd think they would probably try to slip by without Uncle Joe seeing them."

"Yes, it's only an off chance."

They headed north by west. Vapour hung over the cliffs after the rain died away. Wind flurries whistled down the funnel of the cañon which presently they entered. In past centuries, boulders had been torn loose from the troughs of the gorge and flung down into the bed of the stream, so that travel was very difficult. They went in single file, the horses picking a way slowly and carefully.

From the upper end of the cañon, they clambered into a

jumble of tip-tilted hills and timbered slopes. They plunged into deep ravines and up breakneck grades. Small wonder few people came into the country to disturb its shy inhabitants.

Out of this maze of torn and twisted strata, they came at last to a valley Jim recognized. It was the one where old Joe Tolman lived. They fell again into single file and descended the stiff hill slope. The cabin lay below them, and close to it the mountain corral. The sun had come out and an amber light filled the hollow.

The door of the cabin was open, but no smoke rose from the chimney. A dog came from inside and howled at them dismally. It returned to the cabin, presently reappeared, and lifted its throat in another mournful howl.

The sound of it chilled Jim's blood. He had a swift apprehension of disaster. The cabin had some story of tragedy to tell.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A SHOT IN THE BACK

SOMETHIN' wrong," grunted Sturgis, pulling up on a little flat just before they made the final descent.

"Looks like," agreed Lutz.

Two buzzards were moving in a circle far up on the blue sky. Down in the corral, two calves were blatting piteously, while their mothers stood just outside the fence trying to comfort them.

"Mighty funny," Sturgis said. "By Gar must be sick—or somethin'."

"Afraid he's not sick," the ranger replied, speaking for the first time.

The same fear oppressed Jim. He felt instinctively that the inside of the cabin would have a tragic story to tell.

Lutz swung from his horse a hundred yards from the house. "We'll go in, Mr. Lawrence an' me. You boys stay here."

The two men walked to the house. The dog came whining to them and followed into the cabin.

Neither of the men spoke at first. What they saw needed no words. The body of a man lay on the floor, face down, arms flung out, head toward the bed and feet nearest the door. There was a pool of blood beside it.

The two officers took one quick appraising look around the cabin. A cheap oil lamp was on the table. The kerosene was entirely out of it, and the wick charred and ragged. Presently, the officers moved toward the body. Lawrence knelt beside it and made an examination.



"Shot in the back," he said quietly.

"Yep. It's old Joe Tolman."

"Been dead some time."

"Expect they passed last night."

"Must have been treachery. The old man didn't know he was going to be shot," the ranger said.

"He knew too much, the murderer figured."

"I wonder what it was he knew?"

"I got a guess comin'."

"Here, too."

"The fellow that did this wasn't takin' any chances."

"No. He thought that dead men can't tell stories about the folks they have seen."

"Right. But why did he come here at all? What was the big idea in stoppin' here to see old Joe?" The sheriff scratched his grizzled thatch.

The answer to that came to them a minute later. They heard Jim's voice outside calling the ranger.

Lawrence stepped to the door.

"The buzzards!" cried the boy. "There's a dead horse in a little gulch back here."

The officers followed him. They told their news on the way. The place was less a gulch than an arroyo. The dead animal filled the bed of it at the place where it lay. The horse was a bay. The sheriff and the ranger examined the carcass. It told them the same story. The horse had been shot in the flank. But the bullet which had killed it had gone into the head between the eyes. Somebody had with a knife hacked away the brand on the shoulder, cutting at the flesh until the mark was entirely unrecognizable.

Lutz spoke: "The horse was shot while they were makin' their getaway from the hold-up. It played out comin' over the mountains. But he got it this far. Maybe the others

rode on. Maybe they waited up on the hillside for him. They'd been ridin' fast, an' their horses were about played out, too. So he couldn't ride pillion behind one of the other fellows. He came down to get a horse from the corral. It was dark—no moon. He may have figured he could rope a horse unnoticed. But the dog barked."

"Yes, that's a good guess," Lawrence nodded. "The dog barked. If it hadn't, poor Joe Tolman would still be alive."

"You mean that he came out to see what was wrong?" Jim said.

"Probably. And the murderer decided right then that the safest thing was to kill the old man so he couldn't tell what he knew. He came forward and acted friendly. Maybe he asked for tobacco. Anyhow, he followed Tolman into the house and shot him in the back when he was so close the gun almost touched him."

Lutz took up the story. "Yep. The powder marks show that. Then he went out without even stopping to blow out the lamp, roped a horse, saddled it, shot his own, blotted out the brand, an' rode away. The damnedest cold-blooded murder I ever knew!"

One of the posse spoke up: "But, By Gar couldn't have known this fellow had been in the train robbery. Matter of fact, he couldn't know there'd been any robbery."

"No, but he'd find out in a day or two. He'd put two and two together. This fellow comin' at night—on a wounded horse—headin' for the park. Tolman was no fool." This from the sheriff.

"So the fellow killed him?"

"Killed him, figurin' that way he'd covered his tracks. He'll turn Tolman's horse loose at the entrance to the park."

The usual well-intentioned fool questioner blurted out his query. "Who do you reckon it was?"

Lutz looked at him out of his expressionless eyes, "You guess, York."

Someone barked a nervous laugh. York retired within himself in embarrassment. They moved toward the house.

"Have to dig a grave," the sheriff said. They found a pick and shovel. Sturgis selected a spot near the foot of a grassy slope.

Jim went into the cabin while the grave was being dug. The body had been lifted and placed on the bunk where Uncle Joe had slept for years. The ranger had covered the face with a bandanna handkerchief.

Jim looked around the cabin. He started. His eyes had fallen on a dry brown splash in the centre of a big flat stone sunk into the ground in front of the fireplace for a hearth.

He spoke in a low voice to Lawrence: "I've got somethin' to tell you."

The only other man in the cabin was York. The ranger turned to him casually and pleasantly. "Would you mind telling Sheriff Lutz I'd like to see him?"

"Sure. Surest thing you know," the man answered, and he vanished.

"That's dried tobacco juice on the stone there," Jim said, rising excitement in his voice.

Lawrence examined the stone. "Yes," he agreed, a question in his eyes.

"Old Uncle Joe smoked, but he didn't chew."

"That's worth knowing."

"The old man was neat, even kinda fussy. If that stain had been there before—before that visitor came, he would have washed it up."

The ranger's eyes, resting on those of Jim, were hard and keen. "You think his murderer made the stain—someone who chews tobacco?"

"Someone who has a trick of spittin' on clean, open spaces."

Not for an instant did the ranger relax the rigour of his gaze. "Meaning someone in particular?"

Jim nodded, involuntarily lowering his voice, "Meanin' Sam Marshall."

"You've seen him do it?"

"Seen him—an' been told by those who know him well that it's a trick of his. He does it unconsciously."

The sheriff came into the cabin. Lawrence repeated what Jim had told him.

"Good—if we're sure—if we can fasten the proof of the habit on him," Lutz said.

Jim had more to tell, the story of how Bob Henry had found the other dead horse, of how Bob and Hughes had both accepted the tobacco stain as convincing evidence.

"It may hang Marshall yet," Lutz commented. "Though, of course, it's not proof. Lots of men chew tobacco. I used to myself. But keep your mouth shut, boy. No talkin' about this, mind. If he thinks we're followin' a hot trail, he'll light out sure."

Outside the cabin, the sun was shining brightly. The dog had ceased to bark and was making friends with Sturgis. The calves, released from the corral, were bunting at the udders of their mothers in the swift satisfaction of their hunger. Life was moving on just the same as though old Joe Tolman had not been treacherously done to death.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### LOST PARK AGAIN

THE sheriff, his deputy, and the ranger held a consultation, with Jim a silent onlooker. They discussed the best methods of procedure.

Lawrence urged that it was better not to enter the park at once in force. It would give the outlaws warning that they were suspected, and since as yet there was no proof that the train robbers had come from this district, a demonstration of armed men against them could not possibly do any good and might do a lot of harm.

"Truesdale wouldn't light out," Sturgis ruminated aloud. "He's too dawggoned cussed obstinate, Black Tom is. No, sir, he'd stay put, right there watchin' us, ready to burn powder at the drop of the hat. But this Sam Marshall, like enough he'd pull his freight. I'd kinda expect him to."

"Something in that," admitted the sheriff. "Marshall ain't sittin' any too easy in his mind right now. He's a dirty killer, with no more conscience than a sidewinder. But he's worried about old Joe Tolman, plumb uneasy, because he figures he ain't covered his tracks any too good. Some of his own gang might round on him. He's only got to look at his own self to know he'd squeal on the others like a yellow pup if he got his back to the wall."

"I don't reckon Truesdale would squeal—nor Tige Ball either. They're hardy sons of guns. But, like you say, Marshall would. An' he'll judge them by himself. O'

course, he knows they've got this Tolman killin' on him, if they weren't in on it, too." This from Sturgis, while he rasped his rough cheek in deep thought with the balls of his fingers. "What say we run him down an' throw a rope on him? If he comes through, fine an' dandy; if he don't, well, we'll let him lie in the calaboose."

The ranger shook his head. "We haven't enough on him yet, and he knows it. He'd keep his mouth shut. Besides, if we have to promise someone immunity to turn state's evidence, we don't want it to be Marshall—not if he killed Tolman."

"You're damn whistlin' there," Sturgis agreed.

"My idea is for you to camp together, Sheriff, while Jim and I slip into the park and look around a bit. One of us will report to you inside of two days. Maybe we'll pick up some news that may hang this thing on the Lost Park gang."

"All right, Lieutenant," Lutz yielded. "Only it's understood I'm to be in when the arrests are made."

The sheriff's posse camped in the hills not far from the entrance to the park. It was early next day when the ranger and Jim Turner slipped through the gateway and left Lutz there.

They did not take the road, but clung to the ridge, following it until they were directly back of the Henry place. It had been discussed between them whether Jim should first go down alone and talk with Hughes if he were at home, and if not with his niece. In that case, he could tell the ranchman that a sheriff's posse was up in the hills looking for the bandits who had held up the Flyer, and also that old Joe Tolman had been murdered. This news, if indeed it were news to Hughes, would be startling enough to get from him some expression of his attitude toward these crimes. After this, Jim could be guided by developments. The alternative plan would be for

them both to go down, Jim introducing the ranger simply as a friend. It might, perhaps, be better to admit some connection with the sheriff's posse.

Jim did not like either plan. He wanted to tell the Henrys the whole truth. Anything less would make him feel like a traitor to them. He shrank from any deception. Yet he knew that, in joining the posse, he had surrendered his freedom of action and put himself under orders. The game had to be played out according to the rules. Much as he hated it, he had to go through.

It was, perhaps, because Lawrence distrusted Jim's discretion that he decided to go down with him to the Henry place. Moreover, he wanted to see for himself Hughes Henry's reception of the news. It was a risk. Henry had never seen the ranger, but Truesdale and Ball had. If either of them chanced to be at the ranch, it would be very awkward. Marshall had seen Lawrence, too, for that matter, but the officer did not count him. After the flogging Hughes Henry had given him, he was not likely to be hanging around the place as a visitor.

The two young men dropped down through the timber and past one corner of the corral. They did not want to be noticed until they were close to the house, but, on the other hand, they could not afford to give any appearance of a furtive approach.

A man came out of the house to the porch and filled his deep lungs with an indolent yawn.

"Hughes Henry," said Jim to his companion.

"He's a mighty well-set-up man," the ranger said, looking him over critically.

Henry's yawn stopped midway. He had caught sight of them.

They moved forward to the porch.



The ranchman spoke: "Why, Jim, where'd you come from?"

"I came to bring you news. Maybe you've heard it, maybe not. The Flyer was held up Thursday night an' the express messenger killed."

The eyes of Hughes Henry instantly registered keen interest. His figure tautened, lost the air of careless ease with which it had settled into itself.

"Where was this hold-up?" he asked curtly.

"Near Windy Point. Thirty miles west of Gold Hill."

"Hmp!" Hughes gave a moment to silent thought. "You got here mighty quick. What for? What's the idea?" He looked at Jim and then at the other man, his face set to hard lines.

Jim told a partial truth. "The sheriff sent for me to guide a posse here."

"Here!" exclaimed Hughes. "Why here?"

"They were headin' this way by their tracks."

"Meanin' that they are Lost Park men, the hold-ups?"

"Tha's what Lutz thinks."

Hughes Henry asked harshly an apparently irrelevant question: "Who's yore friend?"

"Jack Lawrence. He's with the posse. Lutz is huntin' the hills outside. We slipped in to warn you."

"Warn me of what?" demanded Hughes, his face and voice hard and cold. "Does he claim I'm one of the train robbers?"

"No. But I wanted you to know how the cards lie so you can play yore hand an' not make any mistake. I've not told you the worst yet. We know the robbers headed this way because we found Uncle Joe Tolman murdered in his cabin, shot down from behind."

"Good God!" The exclamation broke from Hughes in the

blankest of dismay. There could be no doubt of its validity. It had been wrung from him in incredulous horror. "By Gar murdered! Why? What for?"

Jim looked at the ranger. He did not know how much or how little he was to tell. Therefore, he put it up to the lieutenant.

Lawrence knew it would be easy to make a mistake now. He had made up his mind that Hughes Henry was not implicated in the robbery or the murder. The ranchman could be of great help to those hunting the criminals. On the other hand, he could hinder them by warning the guilty men of what to expect. The ranger took a chance. It was his business to take them. He was used to judging men, and Henry impressed him favourably. Therefore, he told the whole story of what they had seen and what they had deduced at Tolman's cabin.

Hughes listened without comment, his eyes stern. When Lawrence had finished, he spoke quietly:

"I never heard of a more cold-blooded murder. Uncle Joe was a harmless, kind old fellow I've known thirty years, the sort who would always be there when he was needed, who would do to ride the river with. I'll not stand for it. Whoever did it ought to be hanged. I don't care who it was."

Lawrence met him eye to eye. "Let's get this straight, Mr. Henry. There were two murders committed and a train robbery. You can't separate one crime from the other. Are you with us clear down the line? Or aren't you?"

The older man appraised in momentary silence this forceful, clean-built young man. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded bluntly. "Are you talkin' for Lutz—or for yourself—or who for? Come clean, young fellow."

The officer snapped back information curtly: "I'm Lieutenant Lawrence, of the rangers. I'm talking for the

Territory of Arizona, and I call on you as a good citizen to help us hunt down this gang of murderous outlaws."

"Are you callin' on me to join yore posse?"

"No. You can help us more if you don't. The question is whether you want to help us. You know what they say outside—that you're the leader of the Lost Park gang. Jim here tells me it's not true. Looking at you, I believe Jim. You don't look like a cold-blooded murderer to me."

Lawrence said it to sting and it stung.

"I reckon you expect me to give three loud cheers for the testimonial," Hughes Henry answered coldly, with bitterness. "Well, I'll disappoint you right now. I don't thank any man for such a back-handed slap."

Jim cut in eagerly: "He didn't mean, Mr. Henry, that——"

Hughes Henry brushed aside his explanation. "That'll do, son. You're not in this." To the ranger he continued, his voice a challenge: "But if any man was to put it the other way an' say I was a thief an' a murderer, why, I expect he would hear from me quick."

Lawrence smiled, an engaging smile that had the warmth of a spring sun appearing from behind clouds. "I'm not going to say it, Mr. Henry. We want you with us, not against us. These men are your neighbours. I know that. But they're a bad lot. It's time Arizona got rid of them. Don't you think so?"

Hughes did not answer the question directly. "What you want me to do?" he asked cautiously.

"Tell us what you know about these fellows' movements this last week. Find out what you can. We're in no position to get information. You are. We've got to tie these fellows up in a web of evidence that will convict them. Give us that, and we'll do the rest."

"You're askin' me to talk with them an' betray them. I won't do it," Hughes said harshly. "If there's anything else I can do, you can count on me—but I won't get their confidence an' round on them. What do you take me for?"

"It's not a question of getting their confidence. They're not going to tell you anything they don't want to. Very likely you can find out from others what we want to know."

"An' what do you want to know?"

"Who has been out of the park this last week? When did they go? When return? Did they go in a bunch? Or come back together?"

"What men do you especially want to know about?"

"Truesdale, Marshall, Ball, and another fellow called Reeves."

"You're a good guesser," Henry admitted. "If anyone in the park did it, these fellows were the ones. I can tell you now part of what you want to know. Three of 'em were away most of the week. I dunno about Ball, but I can find out. Marshall an' Reeves left together. If any of 'em have got back yet, I don't know it. But they may be here just the same. I've been stickin' around the ranch for two days an' haven't seen anyone."

"Will you find out?"

"Yes. I reckon you two had better stay here with us, an' if I were you, I'd lie low for a while."

Lawrence and Turner accepted the invitation and the advice.

## CHAPTER XXX

### RELATIVES MEET

PATTIE and Bob were delighted to see Jim Turner and his friend when the twins rode up to the ranch half an hour after the arrival of the officers. Both of the young people wondered what had brought Jim back so soon. Later, Hughes Henry told them, but for the present they were left guessing.

The girl was so indignantly full of news of her own that she did not want to find out now the cause of Jim's return. It seemed more important to discuss what she had just learned.

"You're in time for the wedding," she said bitterly. "Tom Truesdale is going to marry Sue the day after to-morrow."

"Homer feels mighty bad about it," Bob added. "But there's nothin' he can do."

"What about Sue?" asked Jim dismally. It was as though the news had knocked the wind out of him. He did not understand why he should feel such a chill sinking at his heart.

"She's most cried her eyes out, but that doesn't help her any. She's afraid of Tom and she'll marry him," Pattie explained.

"Why? Why is she afraid of him?" the ranger asked. "He can't hurt a woman. He wouldn't if he could."

"Maybe he would and maybe he wouldn't. Anyhow, he could take it out of her father. No. Her spirit's broken. She'll marry him."

"I reckon we'd better drift up thataway an' talk with her and Mr. Tedrow," Jim said, looking at Lawrence.

The ranger nodded. "I reckon." He turned to Pattie, "Didn't see Truesdale, did you?"

"No. He's just back. Been hunting in the hills for a few days."

"Get anything?" asked Lawrence.

"No. They had bad luck."

"Who was with him?"

"Sam Marshall was. I didn't hear about the others, if there were any."

It occurred to Jim that perhaps the hunter would find they had not yet endured all the bad luck that was to ensue from their ill-omened trip. He had a premonition that soon now they would reap the whirlwind they had sown. Jack Lawrence would take them in his dragnet unless they got him first.

After supper, the two guests at the Henry ranch rode to the Tedrow place. They dismounted a few hundred yards from the house and approached on foot from the rear, to escape observation in case Truesdale or any of his friends chanced to be present.

They could see Homer restlessly pacing the porch. After a short time, Sue joined him. Evidently they were alone.

Jim and the ranger emerged from the shadows. The two on the porch stopped, watching them. For reassurance, the range-rider called out his name.

Homer Tedrow welcomed them with that touch of old-time courtesy Jim had noticed before, but the life had gone out of his hospitality. He was, quite plainly, depressed to the level of hopelessness. Even in the semi-darkness, the effect of much weeping could be seen on the girl's swollen cheeks.

The young range-rider introduced his friend, and Lawrence brushed aside at once all finesse of approach.

"Mr. Tedrow, we're here to help you if we can—and we need your help in return. The S. W. & A. Flyer has been held up. Two men have been killed, one of them murdered in cold blood—old Joe Tolman."

Tedrow was surprised momentarily out of his despair. "Old Joe Tolman murdered?" he repeated.

"Yes. It's a bad business. Probably Marshall killed Tolman, but Truesdale is at the head of the whole business."

"My God!" gasped the nester. "He's going to marry Sue day after to-morrow."

Lawrence asked the girl a question, directly, bluntly: "Do you want to marry him?"

"No," she wailed.

"Then he'll not marry you." Don't worry about that. We're here to get evidence against him. Can you or your father help us?"

Sue Tedrow looked at the slender brown man, so quietly sure of himself, so good to look upon, whose eyes were at the same time kind and strong as tested steel, and there flowed into her heart a resurgence of hope. Since he said she need not be afraid, she was not afraid, for the first time in many weeks. She had met him less than five minutes ago, but already the burden of her troubles was lifted from her shoulders to his.

"We'll tell you anything we know," she murmured, with a rush of colour to her cheeks.

There was, after all, little that they could tell that implicated Truesdale in the train robbery beyond the general fact of his absence for some days at the time. The Tedrows had seen him two or three times prior to his disappearance



from the park, the previous week, in whispered conversations with Marshall, Ball, and Reeves. Each of these in turn had come to the place, drawn Truesdale aside, held a hurried, low-voiced talk with him, and ridden away. Truesdale had been away nearly a week. He had returned two days since and had announced that he and Sue would be married at once.

Jim broke in: "Mr. Tedrow, there's something about this marriage business we don't understand. Pattie says Truesdale doesn't act like he really is—is fond of yore daughter. We don't want to butt in, you understand. But we gotta get the facts."

"He isn't! He isn't!" the girl cried.

"Then why is he so set on marryin' you?"

"That's just it. I don't know," she answered, once more greatly disturbed.

"There's a reason—must be," Jim frowned in thought.

"Have you got any money—or property?"

"No. You can see how poor we are."

The girl's father said nothing. There was on his face for one fitting instant an expression of puzzled wonder, of dawning doubt.

The ranger officer saw it. With crisp decision, he attacked the long-silent reticence of this sensitive man.

"We've come to a wall, Mr. Tedrow. If there's a door through it, we can't find it. But you can. What you know, we've got to know—if we're going to save your daughter. Who are you?"

"Why, I'm—Homer Tedrow." The old bookman trembled, clutching at the old alias he had built up to hide behind. He knew, with shrinking apprehension, that this was about to be snatched from him.

"What do you know about Edward Sloan—and Custer Turner?" the lieutenant demanded bluntly.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" pleaded the nester brokenly.  
"I beg of you—don't—don't."

"We've got to get to the bottom of this—got to do it for your daughter's sake, to get a case against Truesdale."

"But, surely—surely——"

"It is necessary. I am sorry."

The old man visibly struggled with himself, then burst out with information almost as though it were a despairing cry.

"My wife was Edward Sloan's sister."

"Then your daughter is his niece. Have you heard that Sloan died last month?"

"No."

"He died without a will. Your daughter must be his heir-at-law—or one of his heirs. Truesdale knows that."

"Had Mr. Sloan other sisters?" Jim asked eagerly.

"No. Only the one." Tedrow spoke reluctantly, as though he still hoped to conceal his secret.

"But—I don't understand. My mother was Custer Turner's wife and the sister of Edward Sloan. If he had only one sister——"

Jim broke off, up against an impasse.

The old nester looked at the young man, lips and hands trembling violently. The colour had been driven from his face. He broke into a little cry that seemed to come from the depths of his emotion. His eyes had the strange expression of one who has seen his dead come to life.

"My son!"

The words fell so low, so doubtfully, that Jim was not sure he caught them aright.

Gently Lawrence asked the question: "Was your wife's first name Sarah?"

"Yes."

Again Jim interrupted impulsively: "But—that was my mother's name."

"She was first your wife and afterward the wife of Custer Turner," suggested the lieutenant.

The old man's face worked. "Yes."

Jim came to a new discovery. "Then yore daughter—Miss Sue here—is my sister, my half sister."

"Your full sister." Homer Tedrow swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. "You are my son, boy, not the son of—Custer Turner; that is, if your mother was Sarah Sloan. My real name is Horace Medlock."

"It seems some mixed up," Lawrence said. "I reckon you'd better tell us the whole story, Mr. Tedrow."

The nester knew it was inevitable—knew that the secret he had hidden for many years must now come out. But every instinct in him protested against this exposure to the world of his old wounds. Yet, conflicting with this, were two adverse currents: the need of protecting his daughter from harm, and the knowledge that the son who had been lost was now found. These swept away the reticence of years, the silence he had imposed upon himself by reason of his failure to escape shipwreck in the warfare of life.

The story was a sad one. Horace Medlock, a man of dreams, accustomed to live the drama of life within him, fell in love after he was forty with the daughter of his landlady. She was young, pretty, vivacious, and full of life. He won her. They were married, had two children, and were reasonably happy in spite of widely divergent temperaments. There were times when the youth in her, the desire for a fuller, more colourful life, cried out tumultuously for expression. Her husband was a still, quiet man, who could for hours bury himself in a book and forget she was in the room.

After Custer Turner came to Gold Hill, these hours of re-

bellion grew more frequent. The herb doctor was good-looking, bold, mysterious, and unusual. He somehow suggested romance to the young wife, the romance of the great unexplored world into which she longed to plunge. He talked well, told of far-away places which excited her imagination; and, after a time, when her mind had been prepared for it, he tempted her with the story of his love for her.

The young wife rejected his advances. But she had been indiscreet, and Custer Turner brought it about that her walks with him were compromising. The neighbours talked. Her husband accused her, and, after a violent quarrel, she fled with Turner, taking the children. A friend of Medlock saw them two days later in Texas, learned the truth, and stole the little girl, returning her to the distressed father. Medlock went to the Texas town at once, but Turner and his victim had gone, leaving no address.

Medlock hid himself in Lost Park, assuming another name. From that day, he had never passed outside its portals, and he had heard no word of the young wife who had, in a fit of hot rebellion, deserted him for the lover who promised the glamour of romance and the adventure of living. The husband held no grudge against her. He realized that she had been a victim of her own temperament and his, of the narrow lines in which their life together had been cast. According to the judgment of the times, she was a lost woman, and he knew with certainty that any woman who trusted herself utterly to Custer Turner, as she had done, was lost indeed.

After the nester had finished, Jim told his story. The old man listened. At times his heart was filled with sadness; again he felt a glow of the blood when he looked at this stalwart son, so unlike himself, so full of the strength and energy and vitality of youth.

Horace Medlock offered no demonstration of affection.

It was not in his shy and retiring disposition to do so. But his daughter Sue, hungry for love, lifted out of despair, came to her new-found brother with a little sob of joy.

Jim petted her, awkwardly, himself full charged with emotion.

"Don't you worry. Don't you!" he begged. "It will be all right now, won't it, Lieutenant?"

Jack Lawrence nodded with a smile, and in that quiet promise the girl again found help which flowed into her heart and brought a healing comfort, for the moment, at least.

"That's what we're here for," the officer said.

She looked at these two young men, one still a boy, one scarcely more, and she thought of Black Tom Truesdale with a renewal of dread. They were brave. She did not doubt it. But what chance would they have against that stark killer?

She shuddered.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### IN THE DARK

**T**HERE was no longer need to ask why Tom Truesdale wanted to marry Sue Tedrow. The only question was as to the best way to circumvent him.

"Miss Pattie said to bring you both back with us," Jim said. "I reckon that would be best. It wouldn't hardly be safe for you to stay here. He might get another hurry-up notion an' push the marriage ahead."

Neither father nor daughter made much protest. They were content to leave the burden of decision to the two, who would also have the burden of defence. They hurriedly gathered a few clothes, flung them into an old telescope grip, and mounted two horses which the young men had roped and saddled.

Half an hour later, they reached the Henry ranch. Pattie came down from the porch to meet them.

"I'm so glad you came. I thought you might have decided to stay at home, and I think that would have been foolish. Come right in."

Hughes Henry presently came into the living room to welcome his guests. There he and Pattie learned the news that Sue and Jim were brother and sister.

"It'll come right soon to a showdown," Hughes Henry said. "Soon as Tom knows you're gone an' finds out where you're at, he'll come bustin' in. He'll sure be on the prod, too, if I know him. He's some impatient, Tom is. I've seen

him smash through a door rather than wait to have it unlocked."

"Does Truesdale come up to your place every evening, Mr. Tedrow?" the ranger officer asked.

"Pretty near every evening, when he's in the park."

Lawrence turned to Jim. "What say we drift up that way?"

The old nester showed unease. "You're not intending to have any trouble with him," he said a little timidly.

"Not any, if we can help it. No, I thought if we were there and he didn't know it, we might stumble on some evidence."

"I'd be very careful."

"I'll go along," Hughes Henry said.

"No, I'd rather you wouldn't," Lawrence told him. "We're on this job, Jim and I. We're man hunters. But you're not in it. Besides, two men can stay hidden better than three."

"Oh, if you don't want me," Henry replied, a little huffed.

"It's not that," the officer answered with a friendly smile. "But we don't want to get you into trouble. You know these men. They are your neighbours. They are no friends of ours, and it's up to us to handle this thing without having you come into the open on our side. We are not ready to arrest Truesdale and his crowd yet. But he may force my hand, and if so, it's at least an even bet that he wins out. So you'd better keep yourself in the clear, far as you can."

"Sounds like good medicine to me, Mr. Henry," Jim agreed.

"Maybeso. Well, have it yore own way, young fellows. If you take my advice you'll move very slow before mixin' it with Tom an' very fast afterward."

The two young men rode back to the Tedrow place, and,



as before, they tied their horses several hundred yards from the house.

The place was dark. There was no sign of life in or about the house. But as they crept up to the porch from the rear, they heard the sound of horses moving along the trail. Almost at the same moment, they could make them out emerging from the grove.

The two young men scuttled for shelter. They had no time to agree on a place of hiding. It was each one for himself, and the run for cover took them in different directions. Lawrence made for the stable by the corral. Jim dropped down behind a pile of corded wood not far from one side of the house. The Bar X Y rider regretted almost instantly this choice of a screen, but it was too late now to change his mind. He drew from its holster his revolver and crouched low.

The approaching riders were two in number, he judged. Their voices became more distinct. He made out words.

"No lights," one growled. "Can't have gone to bed, can they?"

Jim recognized, with a quickening of the pulse, both this voice and the answering one.

"Bed, no! I told 'em I'd likely be along."

The second speaker was Black Tom Truesdale, the first was Sam Marshall.

"Then where are they?"

Truesdale's voice lifted to a snarling oath. "If they're playin' any monkey tricks with me——"

Jim could hear them swing from their horses.

"'Lo, Tedrow!" Then, with the flare of anger, Truesdale's summons carried suddenly the crack of a whip. "Come outa there, both of you, or, by God——"

There was no answer. Truesdale took the porch steps in two leaps and tore open the door. He strode into the house,

shouting Sue Tedrow's name. Presently, he came out again. The silence within may, perhaps, have daunted him a little; at least had bewildered him.

"They've gone," he said stupidly.

His companion was pleased at the check Truesdale had received, but he dared not show it. The discomfiture of someone else always rejoiced his soul.

"Gone where?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"Do you reckon they've heard anything?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, I dunno. About the Flyer an'—what happened after."

Truesdale put it into hard and brutal words: "You mean about you murdering old By Gar."

"Ssh!" warned Marshall.

"What if they have? What could they hear that everybody won't know soon?"

"Well, maybe—oh, I dunno!" Marshall's voice dropped. "He was a kinda friend of theirs, the ol' man was."

"He was a kinda friend of everybody, you treacherous wolf."

"No sense talkin' thataway, Tom. I had to do it to cover our trail," the other pleaded in a whine.

"Yore own trail, you mean. You're not worried none about ours."

"Tell you I had to do it, Tom, jest like you had to bump off that fool express messenger."

"Not the same," Truesdale denied harshly. "He reached for a gun an' I let him have it. The fool asked for it. But ol' By Gar! Hell, you're too much of a yellow coyote for me. He never did you or me any harm. More 'n once he did both of us a good turn."

"Goddlemighty, Tom, don't you get the point? I had to do it. He come out when the dog barked an' found me in the corral ropin' a horse. I walked back to the house with him explainin' how I didn't want to rouse him from sleep an' was borrowin' the loan of a bronc. All the time I was figurin' that there wasn't any other way out. When the news of the hold-up came, he'd know for sure who did it. No other way, I tell you."

Truesdale heard him without deigning a word of reply. The fellow's protests were only words.

"Where have the Tedrows gone?" Black Tom demanded, scowling.

"To Henry's, maybe. Keep yore shirt on. They'll be back, I reckon."

This was probably true. They might have gone on a neighbourly call. But even this irritated Tom, in view of the fact that they might reasonably have expected him to ride up to the place.

"Wait here!" he ordered.

He strode down to the corral. Two horses, a sorrel and a gray, were missing from the little bunch at the watering trough below the windmill. He shouted the information back to Marshall, then moved toward the stable to confirm his suspicion by checking up on the saddles.

Behind the door of the stable a man waited for him, revolver in hand, nerves and muscles tensed for instant action.

Then from the direction of the house, a startled voice lifted itself into the night air and flung out a frightened oath. Black Tom knew that "Goddlemighty!" came from Marshall's throat. Dragging a revolver from its scabbard, he had just turned to run back along the path from the stable to the house when he heard the sound of a shot from the same direction.

Then a curt command near at hand halted him. "Hands up!"

He swung round. In the doorway of the stable stood the ranger lieutenant. His gun covered the outlaw.

Instantly, Truesdale's weapon flamed. Almost simultaneously Lawrence flung back his answer. Firing as he moved, the bandit padded toward the stable to lessen the distance between him and his foe.

The ranger lurched against the door post, then steadied himself to continue firing. It was impossible to count the shots that passed between the men, so fast they came. Jack Lawrence was hit. He felt himself sliding to the ground, knew that he was beginning to swim into darkness. What followed, he did not know.

He did not hear the cry for help that came from Marshall. He did not see Black Tom turn and make for the house in a lumbering run.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### AT CLOSE QUARTERS

JIM TURNER lay crouched behind the pile of corded wood and heard the confirmation of his suspicions as to the murder of old Joe Tolman from the lips of the guilty man. There rose in him a surge of horror, a renewal of hatred against the villain so strong and overpowering that, after Truesdale had left for the corral, he could scarcely refrain from rising and ordering the murderer to reach for his weapon and fight it out.

But this was not his private feud. He was here under orders. Lawrence and Lutz wanted to bring home definitely to these men the crimes of robbery and murder. He had to wait and let events take their course.

Jim rose to peer over the piled cordwood in order to see what Marshall was doing. He moved a little to one side, since his view was obstructed. As he did so his foot rested on a round length of sawed wood. It turned beneath his weight. He stumbled, and his body plunged against the piled barricade.

The sound startled Marshall. "Anyone there?" he demanded.

Jim made no answer.

The outlaw had no doubt the sound had been caused by a mountain rat or some other small denizen of the wilds. Had he guessed the truth, he would never have moved forward to investigate.

There was no chance for Jim to slip away. A crisis was precipitating itself upon him. He had no time to decide whether he would kill this man or arrest him. The pressure of events would decide that. It did not occur to him to destroy his enemy safely from ambush, as Marshall would have done had their situations been reversed.

Face to face they met at the end of the wood pile.

"Put 'em up!" the Bar X Y rider ordered.

Marshall's jaw dropped. He was taken completely by surprise. The amazed "Goddlemighty!" that broke from his throat was an index of the helpless dismay, of the fear-filled realization that he had walked into a trap. The only flash of defensive thought that came to him was that he must gain time.

The dim light made distances deceptive. As the killer flung his hands out and up in sign of surrender, one of them struck the barrel of Jim's revolver and knocked the muzzle of the gun skyward, at the same time flinging a bullet into the air. Marshall grappled with his enemy instantly. This had not been in his plan. It had been a bit of unexpected luck.

They struggled, swaying back and forth as each tried to get his weapon into action. Jim was the lighter of the two, the stringier of build. He lacked the bull strength of the outlaw, for his bones and muscles had not yet developed to the full. He had one great advantage, that of a stout fighting heart. Instinctively he knew that the best way to evade the bear hug of the other, the best way to free himself from the fingers that encircled his right wrist like a steel band, was to give his foe no time to get set.

He writhed away like a tiger, then plunged back fiercely at the scar-faced man, butting at him with head and knee again and again, on top of him every moment, fighting with every ounce of force in him.

Marshall lifted a cry for help, giving ground before this savage assault. His foot caught on a log and he went down, dragging Jim with him. Trying to save himself from the fall, the outlaw's fingers freed the wrist of his foe.

As they struck the ground Jim was on top. His knees clamped themselves to the outlaw's thick waist. One hand found the fellow's hairy throat. He raised himself by it to an upright position and struck hard with the barrel of his revolver once—twice—a third time. The muscles of the man beneath him grew slack. The arms dropped limply. For the time, at least, he was out.

Jim became aware of the slap of running feet. While struggling with Marshall, he had heard a rapid drum-fire of guns and had guessed that his friend and Black Tom had clashed. One of them was heading his way now. Which?

Swiftly, quicker than one could tell it, his hands found first one of Marshall's guns and then the other. He flung them into the darkness and rose hurriedly, gripping his own weapon, to face whatever was impending.

As he waited at the back of the wood pile, near one end of it, the fingers of his left hand closed on a stick of wood. It was a length of heavy piñon, resinous with pitch.

The heavy figure lumbering toward him was not that of the ranger. He knew that before he recognized the dark savage face of the killer.

Later, when he came to think it over, Jim could not understand the unconscious psychology of his action. It seemed to be without volition that his left arm lifted and hurled itself forward. The sawed piece of piñon shot through the air straight at Black Tom and caught him on the chin.

The blow did not stop the big man's rush. Jim fired wildly, and almost at the same instant Truesdale was on him. For a moment, Jim did not realize the situation. He knew



the man's arms were over his shoulders and that his bulk was smothering him. He expected a shift of position, one under which his ribs would crunch from the force of the killer's tremendous muscles. It took him a few seconds to realize that Truesdale was clinging to him helplessly, that the arms were limp and the legs sagging. The outlaw was not unconscious. He was what is known in the ring as groggy. Give him time—a few seconds, a half a minute, perhaps—and the strength would flow back into the great forceful body.

Jim knew that he must snatch victory now, before Truesdale recovered, or he was lost. He tried to escape the man's clinging arms, the weight of his body, even as the killer tried to hang closely to him. The range-rider told himself he must not lose his head, must not get excited, and in the same split second of time his clenched fist moved up hard as he could drive it beneath Truesdale's chin—and again a second time.

The big man lurched backward, arms hanging, the whole frame lax.

Jim could have killed him as he stood there. Instead, measuring the distance, he drove his left, with all the packed strength of his weight behind it, straight to the point of the exposed chin.

The man went down like a pole-axed bullock.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### JIM PLAYS A LONE HAND

**T**HE young range-rider lost no time. He had had luck, unbelievable luck, he told himself. It did not occur to him that he had largely made his own luck by the courage and the swiftness of decision with which he had faced these redoubtable ruffians.

He ran to the horses of the two outlaws and secured the ropes attached to the saddles. With these he securely tied the two men, both hands and feet. Marshall was recovering consciousness and entered a protest before Jim had finished.

"You got no right to tie me up," he complained. "I'll not stand for it. What's eatin' you, anyhow, fellow?"

His captor tied the last knot, then looked into the man's face.

"I'd ought to have killed you," he said quietly. "I'll do it yet, if they don't hang you."

Marshall gasped. His heart seemed to turn over with fear. The struggle had come upon him so quickly that he had not until now recognized his opponent. He told himself that this Turner would kill him as soon as he had a good chance. He would never give him up to the law, not unless he was a born fool.

As soon as he knew that his prisoners were secure, Jim ran down to the corral. What he found at the door of the stable did not surprise him—the body of his friend lying propped against the wall. He stooped and felt the ranger's heart,

but he could not tell whether it was beating or not. Probably he was dead. There seemed to be no life in the limp body lying huddled in that shadowy corner.

He rose, deciding swiftly what was best to do. His prisoners must be taken to a place where they could be held safely, and help must be brought to Lawrence. The thing to do was to get as soon as possible to the Henry ranch with his prisoners. Afterward, someone could ride out and get Sheriff Lutz at his camp.

He returned to his prisoners. Marshall began to beg and to threaten.

"Let's call it quits, fellow," he whined. "No use you an' me scrappin' thisaway all the time. I'll say I done you dirt, if tha's what you want. But you can't get away with this kind of business. You'll get gunned sure."

"Lemme worry about that," advised Jim, untying the man's feet and knotting the end of the rope to the horn of the saddle.

"But you ain't got ary right——"

"You'll find I've got right enough. We're gonna take you down to be hanged by the neck for the murder of an old man who never harmed anybody."

"I never did," the man screamed. "I wasn't nowheres near there when old By Gar was killed. I swear on a stack of Bibles——"

"No need lyin'. I heard Black Tom accuse you of it, an' you didn't even deny it. Point of fact, you admitted it."

"Goddlemighty, you're framin' me," the murderer yelped. "An' me an innocent man. Jest because you got a grudge at me. Honest to God, I was only a-foolin' that time when I kinda played I was mad at you on the ledge. Cain't you take a josh?"

"Don't move from where you're standin'," the Bar X Y

man advised. "Try to climb on that horse, an' I'll pump you full of lead."

About this time, Truesdale awoke to consciousness of a most unsatisfactory world. As soon as he realized that he was bound and helpless, he broke into furious threats and curses. He would kill Turner, the smart aleck, sure as he was a foot high. If he thought he could play monkey tricks with Tom Truesdale, he had another guess coming. He stormed on, struggling to free his hands, interrupting himself to fling wild and appalling promises of vengeance, couched in bloodcurdling terms, at the young fellow who had committed the *lèse-majesté* of manhandling him.

"No use beefin'," Jim told him. "You're going with me down to the Henry ranch, an' you're going as my prisoner. No two ways about that, get on the prod all you like."

Truesdale refused flatly to go.

His captor brought up a horse, then did some expert rope work, at the conclusion of which the rope that bound his hands was attached by a slip knot to the bad man's throat and was tied also to the horn of the saddle.

"Please yoreself, Mr. Truesdale," Jim said evenly. "You can walk or you can be dragged. All one to me. Now if you're both ready, let's go."

The range-rider swung to the saddle of Truesdale's horse, to which both of the men were tied. He stopped to address a word to Marshall before they started.

"Truesdale can do as he pleases. He can trail along an' eat my dust, or he can lie down an' be dragged. Any way that suits his fancy. But not you, Marshall. You'll trot right along like a good li'l' boy. If you hang back I'll gun you *pronto*. Get me?"

Marshall understood. He was in a different relationship to this young fellow than Truesdale, and he knew that he had

to take orders tamely. As for Truesdale, he was furious but impotent. A man can lie down and let himself be dragged by the waist if he is dour enough, but even the most obstinate cannot lie down and let himself be dragged by the neck. There is a limit to the endurance of human nature.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

"NOTHING BUT A CRIMINAL AT THE END OF HIS ROPE"

IT IS safe to say that the next hour was the most humiliating ever endured by Tom Truesdale. He had been used to trampling on the feelings of other men. His vanity had demanded that they sing small before him, and often he had shamed them before their fellows merely because he was by nature a callous bully.

Now he followed in the dust of another man's horse, hands tied behind him, a rope around his neck. Furious gusts of rage swept him. His anger was the more bitter because his captor was a youth, one with no reputation as a bad man. Nothing less than the young fellow's blood would satisfy him when his day of vengeance came.

It was gall for him to trudge up the path to the Henry house and face the battery of eyes turned upon him when those inside trooped out in answer to Jim Turner's "Hello the house!" The three Henrys were there and the two Tedrows.

All five of them were astonished beyond expression. It was hard to believe that Sam Marshall, a hardy ruffian, and Black Tom Truesdale, the terror of the territory, had been dragged in at the end of ropes by this young fellow as cowboys do coyotes. Yet here they were, both battered and bleeding, and their captor had not a scratch on his smooth face.

Truesdale broke into a storm of threats and explanations. Sudden death was the least he promised the condemned fool who had tied him up while he was senseless. In the midst

of his tirade, a man rode up to the house out of the surrounding darkness. He was a nester in the park, a man named Marbury, known as a garrulous gossip. His reputation was neither good nor bad.

Hughes Henry turned to Jim. "Onload yore story, boy. Where's Lawrence? How come you to take Truesdale and Marshall?"

"I had luck," Jim said simply. "Afraid Lawrence is dead. Truesdale shot him."

"An' I'll get you, too, fellow. You're all swelled up like a poisoned pup because you tied me up when I was knocked cld. You cut this rope right away, or——" Again the bad man poured out venomous threats.

Pattie looked at Jim, her brown gold-flecked eyes shining. She was a hill girl, brought up in that outdoors school where courage is esteemed the first virtue. Black Tom was the most dangerous man in Arizona. He was strong, game, aggressive, and a dead shot. Add that he was ruthless, and one gets a combination almost irresistible. But this boy had beaten him, somehow. A wave of colour surged into her smooth tanned cheeks. It was born of the racing excitement of exultation. They had come to issue, her friend and Black Tom, and Jim had had the best of the battle. She had seen Truesdale bully the young fellow, but now the tables had been turned. She was shocked at the news about Lawrence, but even this could not obscure her pride in Jim.

"I'm not cuttin' ropes to-night," Jim said. "I admit I got the breaks. Leave it lay that you're outa luck."

"All the breaks. I'll say so," Marshall whined. "Why this fellow ain't one, two, three with Tom."

Truesdale appealed angrily to the other men present. "Cut this rope, some of you, an' I'll show this guy. Gimme a gun, Hughes, an' I'll clean up right damned now."



“Not just now, Mr. Truesdale,” his captor returned quietly. “I reckon you’ll have to postpone that pleasure, You’re my prisoner, arrested for train robbery and murder.” His eyes met those of the killer without excitement or fear. “You’re nothin’ to me but a criminal at the end of his rope. The law wanted you. It reached out an’ got you, like it would a Mexican sheep-herder.”

“You’re talkin’ to Tom Truesdale, you li’l’ squirt,” the bad man snarled, his face twitching with rage.

“I’m talkin’ to a thief an’ a murderer I’m takin’ to jail. An’ that’ll be enough from you onless you want to be gagged.”

The killer turned to Henry. “Turn me loose, Hughes, We been good friends. It’s all I ask of you.”

Hughes shook his head. “No, Tom. You an’ I had that out long ago. I told you when you started to follow crooked trails where they would lead. You were hell bent to go yore own way. I can’t help you now. I don’t know what they’ve got on you. It’s up to you to prove innocence if you can.”

The eyes of the bad man grew bleaker. “So you’re throwin’ me down, Hughes. You figure it’s time to throw in with these spies.”

“I’m not throwin’ you down, Tom,” retorted Hughes angrily. “You’ve thrown down on yoreself. But I’ll say this, by God! If you stood for killin’ Uncle Joe, for shootin’ him in the back, hangin’ is none too good for you.”

“You’re a liar, if you say I killed him,” Truesdale flung out.

“I don’t say it. You’re game, Tom, whatever else you are. I don’t reckon you’d shoot a defenceless old man in the back. But you train with one that would—and did. You shield him an’ back his play. An’ there’s the man right by yore side.”

Henry’s finger pointed straight at Marshall who began at once to protest his innocence.

"I heard him admit it," Jim cut in. "But let that go right now. We've got work ahead, an' lots of it to-night. Where can I lock up these men?"

"You can keep 'em right here in the house."

Truesdale appealed to Marbury. "Jack, gun this damn fool spy for me, an' I'll sure make it right with you."

Marbury was a man with no force in him. He slid a look which took in Hughes Henry, the young officer, and passed on to Truesdale. It apologized to all of them.

"Why, Tom, I'd sure like to oblige you any way I could. I reckon you'll be free right soon. If there's anything I can do——"

Jim cut into his evasions by taking his prisoners into the house and leaving them in the big room downstairs. He put Bob Henry in charge of them, and he took pains to see that the boy was well armed.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### ON GUARD

IT IS amazing what success will do for a man. Two hours ago, Jim had been a subordinate, an untried boy chosen by Lawrence to assist him, because of the fortuitous circumstance that he knew the location of Lost Park. Now he had emerged from his baptism of fire startlingly victorious. His chief had been struck down. Alone he had carried through. The adventure had transformed him. He felt stirring in himself qualities of leadership not hitherto suspected.

The most important immediate business was to get help to Lawrence if he was still alive and to send a messenger to Sheriff Lutz to guide him into the park. For himself, he did not intend to leave his prisoners, though his heart ached to get back to the ranger.

Briefly, he consulted with Hughes Henry.

"My job is right here," he concluded. "We're sure short of hands till Lutz comes. Do you reckon Bob could find his camp?"

"I expect so. He knows this country mighty well."

"Then I guess I'll send him. Can you take yore buckboard and get Lawrence? I don't know whether he's still livin', but he'll be at the stable door near the corral. Better take this man Marbury with you."

"Tha's a right good idea. If I don't, he'll have the story all over the park in a coupla hours. An' that would be in-

vitin' trouble. There are probably eight or ten men here who would be willin' to try to rescue Truesdale. We'd better keep it under cover that he's been captured, anyhow until after Lutz gets to the ranch. It'll be up to him, then."

Jim returned to the big room and described to Bob as well as he could the location of the sheriff's camp. The boy rode away into the night, and presently the buckboard followed him, diverging from his trail a hundred yards from the house to turn to the left.

The Bar X Y rider was none too easy in his mind. He was alone in the house with two desperate men, except for an old man and two girls. The feeling persisted that the capture of these bandits had been too easy. Events might soon begin to occur that would restore the balance. They were in the country of the outlaws. As soon as word reached the associates of Truesdale and Marshall that they had been taken, some attempt at rescue would be made. Not all of those engaged in this would be habitual criminals, not all of them "bad men," as the phrase is used in the West; they would be, some of them, merely neighbours under an obligation to Black Tom, men more or less at outs with the law and willing to lend a hand to defeat its incursion to Lost Park.

Black Tom's rage had died down to sullen anger. He sat glowering at the floor in silence, rejecting Marshall's overtures at conversation.

There came a tap on the door of the room and the sound of Jim's name. The young man knew that vibrant voice instantly and unbolted the door.

"I've brought some sheets to hang over the windows," Pattie explained. "Someone might creep up and shoot you from outside."

The heart of the Bar X Y man lifted. She was so sweet

and clean a thing, this brown slim girl, and he knew with deep joy that she was his friend.

He got her a chair to stand on, and while she tacked the sheets in place, he watched her. Every rhythmic motion of her limbs and body delighted him, spoke of the freedom that had come to her from years of living in the rare sunshine of the high hills.

When she stepped down from the chair, she stopped to whisper to him: "I'm so proud of you, Jim. I don't know how you ever did it. Nobody else could have done it. But I do wish the sheriff would come. I'm still scared, Jim."

She glanced apprehensively at the two bound men. Black Tom was still staring sullenly at the floor, but her eyes met the malignant scowl of Marshall and the hatred in his face gave her a shock. She knew that if ever she or Jim came into the man's power he would be ruthless.

"Don't you," he advised. "He can't hurt you."

Jim spoke more confidently than he felt. Even if Lutz put these men under lock and key, it would not end their power for evil. There would be a trial, appeals, perhaps a hung jury or a jail break. It was more than an even chance that one or both of them would some day return to the park.

"I know," she admitted reluctantly, as though she were haunted by a fear that he could and would. "Still, you'll be awf'ly careful, won't you?"

"I'll not throw down on myself," he promised. "If I did, he'd gun me in a minute. So would Truesdale for that matter. No, ma'am, I've got a right healthy respect for both of these guys. They wouldn't be here now if I hadn't had a big slice of luck."

Her soft eyes showered gifts on him, largess of admiration and love. "I know better. Look at them, all bruised and

battered. You beat them both fair and square, and, oh, Jim, there isn't another man in Arizona could have done it."

While her praise embarrassed it tremendously thrilled him. She was so quick with life, so eager, so generous. He loved the brown face that responded to emotion so instantly and became an expression of what she felt. Moreover, the boyish vanity in him was warmed by her appreciation. He knew he had won his spurs. To every remote ranch within a hundred miles, the news would drift that he had captured single-handed these two notorious desperadoes wanted by the law. The very notoriety of the Truesdale tradition, his far-flung repute as a killer, would insure the fame of the youth who had rounded them up.

"Luck," he insisted. "Nothin' but luck. I'll tell you about it some time. I saw them comin', and they didn't know where I was at. I had a chance to kill 'em both easy. If I'd known then about Jack being dead, maybe——"

"You'll never be safe as long as they are alive—never."

They were standing near the window, talking in whispers.

"Lemme tell you something, Pat," he said, and there was a gleam in his eyes she had never seen before. "It's like I told him outside. These fellows are just criminals. Truesdale, too. They've come close to the end of their ropes, both of 'em. I usta be mightily scared of Black Tom. But not now. I'll tell you why, girl. A good man has a shade on a bad man every time. He has got back of him something the other fellow hasn't got. He don't have to be scared for fear his friends are betrayin' him. An' he don't have to lie awake nights worryin' about whether the law is ready to pounce on him."

"Just the same, Tom shot Mr. Lawrence."

"An' when he did, he shot a game man an' a first-class officer. I'll just say this. Sometimes the good man goes

down, but, in the long run, the law gets the fellow who is a crook. Bob Ford killed Jesse James. Pat Garrett got Billy the Kid. The time was ripe for someone to get Black Tom, an' I reckon it was written in the book that I should get him. Tha's the way I look at it."

She shook her head, not at all reassured. Truesdale had been too present in her life, his reputation had been too much a legend, for her to accept such a view. It was all very well to say that a good man had a shade on a bad man, but she felt that the truth was quite the reverse. Jim had had the drop on both these men, and he had not killed them. In his place they would have shot him down like a wolf because they were not handicapped by moral scruples. The killer had the edge on a conscientious officer every time.

He bolted the door behind her and returned to his watch. Time wore itself away so slowly that each five minutes seemed to him an hour. More than once he rose nervously and examined the bolt of the door. He made sure that the sheets completely covered the window panes. More than once he inspected the ropes that bound his prisoners, making sure that the knots had not worked loose. Yet he was not really afraid of any attempt they might make to escape. What disturbed him was the chance of an attempt at rescue on the part of their associates.

It was close to midnight. Soon now Hughes Henry would be here, and Bob would arrive with the sheriff's posse. They ought to reach the ranch any minute now. Jim was nervously anxious to turn his prisoners over to Lutz. As soon as he did so, his responsibility would be over.

Presently he glanced at his watch again. As he did so, he heard a shout. There came to him excited voices, the slap-slap of running feet passing down the passage and out of the house.



Jim jumped up and stood rigid, listening intently. Had it come, the expected attack? Apparently not. There was no evidence of it. He was almost sure that one of the voices had been that of Pattie. Probably her uncle had arrived.

He tried to see out of the corners of first one window and then the other. The moon was behind a scudding cloud and he could make out nothing.

Then a woman's voice was lifted in a scream.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### FIRE!

**J**IM'S nerves tingled. He stood for a moment uncertain what to do. The eyes of the two prisoners fixed on him. They, too, guessed that drama of some sort was impending.

Their captor could not endure the suspense. If Pattie or his sister were in danger, he could not stay here guarding these men. They were bound hand and foot. There could be no risk in leaving them for a moment or two. He passed from the room, closed the door behind him, and stepped out on the porch.

From where he stood, he could see nothing unusual, except that there was a glow in the sky to the right. He ran to the end of the porch and jumped to the ground. As he swung around the corner of the house, he became aware of fire. A burning haystack in the meadow was flinging great tongues of flame skyward, the light from these making strange contorted plunges into the encircling shadows.

A shot rang out. Into the air lifted a cry that set all Jim's pulses drumming. It was a scream of terror, and he knew it had come from the throat of a woman.

He headed for the meadow at a run, revolver in hand. The distance was, perhaps, three hundred yards, and he covered it in record time. The figure of a man ducked into the willows. Nobody else was in sight.

The young man stopped and shouted. He called first the

name of Pattie, then that of his sister. An answer came, from the pine grove well to the left, halfway between him and the house. He hurried toward it. Before he reached the grove, he heard the thud of horses' hoofs. Vaguely, he could see the animals moving through the darkness in the direction of the house.

A voice, a woman's voice, called again. He answered, moving that way. He came presently on his sister Sue.

She ran straight to his arms. For she was frightened. She clung to him, trembling with fear.

"What is it?" he asked.

"They shot at us," she gasped.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Some men."

"At you and Pattie?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She ran to the house—to warn you that they are here."

"You mean Truesdale's friends?"

"Yes."

"God! They've headed that way. They may find her."

"Yes."

"Wait!" he ordered. "Stay here. I'm going to the house. They won't find you in the grove. Anyhow, they won't hurt you. When they fired, they must have thought you were men."

He left her there. He was running fast, .44 in hand. In a flash of insight, he saw the plan of these men. They had fired the stack to draw him from the house. Probably at this very moment they were freeing his prisoners. The probability of this set his feet to quicker time.

He heard a shot—another—and another. He heard a heavy voice shout triumphantly, "Got him, by God!"

There reached him the diminishing drum of horses' feet, the sound of a wild yell in the distance, and close at hand the quaver of a disturbed question.

"Are you hurt, Hughes?"

It was Homer Tedrow's voice, and the answer came from Hughes.

"The hellhounds! They took Pattie with them."

Jim was beside Henry in another moment.

"Taken her! Who?" he demanded.

"Truesdale an' his gang. Saddle me a horse quick, boy," Hughes swayed as he spoke, clinging to the porch for support.

"Get a move on you. I got to hurry."

"You've been shot," Jim said.

"Don't I know it? The damn sky's tiltin'. Get me that horse, I tell you."

Hughes Henry sat down on the edge of the porch, still clinging dizzily to a post.

Once more the night became vocal. Voices and the tramp of horses made themselves heard. A group of men rode up. As they swung from their saddles, Jim recognized Bob Henry and Sheriff Lutz. He saw Buck Sturgis come bowlegging forward.

"What's all the shootin'?" demanded the sheriff.

"Truesdale's gang. They've rescued my prisoners. They've shot Jack Lawrence and Hughes Henry. They've taken Pattie Hughes with them."

"Might 'a' known it," Lutz replied abruptly. "Sent two boys to mill. That's what I did. Spill yore story, Turner."

"Not yet. We gotta look after Hughes here. Lawrence is dead, I reckon."

From the buckboard, drawn up in the shadows by the house, an indomitable voice broke in weakly: "Important if true, Jim."

The Bar X Y rider's heart leaped. He ran to the buckboard and looked down into his friend's pale face.

"I thought you were—gone," he said.

The ranger grinned at him. "I'll take a lot of killing yet, Jim. But I sure made a plumb bad mistake. I should have shot first and then told Mr. Truesdale to shove his fists up. That guy's middle name is Sudden Death."

"Hurt bad?" Jim asked anxiously.

"I'll make the raffle, if that's what you mean. But I'm certainly out of this man hunt. It's up to you and Lutz."

"They've taken Pattie with them." For a moment, Jim's voice threatened to break, but he picked up and carried on. "They've headed for hell cross-lots, that crowd. If they hurt her——"

"Pick up the trail warm, Jim. Ride them down fast. And when you meet up with any of these birds, don't stop for conversation. Shoot and keep on shooting till they're out of business. Hughes Henry and I both gave Black Tom a chance to surrender—and see what he did to us."

The two wounded men were carried into the house and put to bed, Hughes protesting fretfully both to Lutz and to Jim that they were not to mind him but get started in pursuit of Truesdale.

"We'll do that right soon," Jim promised. "They won't do her any meanness. They daren't. All Arizona would hunt them down."

None the less, he was himself greatly disturbed. It was contrary to the code of bad men to war on women or use them as pawns against their enemies. For in the outdoors West, such men had as much respect for a good woman as any Galahad could have had. Generally speaking, she would be safe with them at any time, any place. But the circumstances were unusual. Truesdale was a lawless devil with a grievance

against her uncle. He was subject to wild and savage impulses. He would follow his own desires, whatever they might be. Yet at the worst he would be less dangerous to Pattie than Marshall, who was both cruel and revengeful by nature. His frustrated vanity, his rage, his hate, all entered into the equation. She had scorned him as a suitor. Her uncle had flogged him like a cur. Her best friend was the bandit's enemy and had captured and humiliated him. Every impulse in his nature—except the one of fear for his own safety—would urge him to strike at her.

Whenever he let himself think of her danger, Jim's heart turned over. He had to find what comfort he could in the reflection that Truesdale and Marshall were not alone. The men with them were not mad. They must know how fatal it would be to them if any harm came to Pattie Henry. And, in truth, these others would not wish any harm to come to her, but would probably want to protect her if necessary.

The members of the posse consulted together. They were in the room where Hughes Henry was lying.

"We can't follow these guys in the dark," Lutz said. "Point of fact, we don't know in what direction they're headed. This country is all new to me. I'd get lost sure."

Buck Sturgis turned to Henry. "What you think, old-timer? What about these lads on the dodge? Where they likely to hole in at?"

"How can I tell?" Hughes answered hopelessly. "They might move back into the Eagle's Nest country, or they might cross the pass an' drop down to Barlow Park, or again, they might make a break for Old Mex if they figured they could get through. But if they hurt my li'l' girl——"

"Marshall is mighty oneasy in his mind," Jim said. "You can bet on that. He'll be for a long trail over the border soon as it's safe."

"Tha's jest it, soon as it's safe. Right now it ain't, with the whole country patrolled by rangers. No, they'll stick to the hills, for a while, anyways," Sturgis predicted.

"I don't hardly reckon Black Tom would leave the country, not unless you crowd him awful close. I'm not sure he would then. More likely turn on you an' fight it out." This was Hughes Henry's opinion. "The hell of it is, you fellows have got to sit here on yore rumps till daylight while they're makin' tracks."

"If they're headin' for the Eagle's Nest, they'll have to pass Donnelly's ranch, won't they?" Jim suggested. "They might have been seen. Why not send someone to Donnelly's and ask him?"

Hughes nodded in approval. "You're damn whistlin', boy. Bob, you fork a bronc an' burn the wind there. Ask Mac if he's seen or heard anybody passin' thataway. It's not likely he would, seein' it's so late. But you never can tell."

After Bob had ridden away, Jim asked Hughes a question.

"How did Truesdale's friends know we had taken him?"

Hughes swore, by way of expressing his feelings. "That fellow Marbury gave it away. We met Tige Ball a mile or so down the road, an' Marbury shot off his mouth before I could stop him. I figured I'd get back before Tige gathered his crowd, but he rounded 'em up quicker than I thought."

Inside of forty minutes, Bob was back. "Struck their trail all right," he cried out as he came into the room. "Mac Donnelly not only heard 'em—he saw 'em, too, by jiminy! He was expectin' a cow to come in an' was down at the corral when the gang passed. Five of 'em, all told. He's right sure Tom was one of 'em. Heard his voice. They were makin' for the Flat Tops, looks like. We can get after 'em right away without waitin' for mornin'."



"Was yore sister with them?" the sheriff asked.

"Mac couldn't say. It was kinda dark an' they were indistinct."

"Funny he heard Truesdale's voice," Jim said, frowning in thought. "He musta been talkin' right loud. Now, why would he do that, do you reckon? You wouldn't expect him to advertise the way he was going."

"You're thinkin' my thoughts, boy," Buck Sturgis agreed. He turned to Hughes Henry. "What about this Mac Donnelly? Do you reckon maybe he's coverin' Tom's tracks, that maybe they haven't gone thataway a-tall?"

Hughes brushed this aside at once. "If Mac says it's so, it's so. You can tie to him. I've known him thirty years, an' I never knew him break his word or lie. He's one square hombre."

"Then let's go," Jim urged. "The quicker the sooner."

They filed down the road toward the Donnelly ranch. Bob rode with the posse. He knew the Eagle's Nest country and was to act as guide. One of Lutz's men stayed at the Hughes ranch to help take care of the invalids.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### "ON THE PROD"

FROM the window of her bedroom, Pattie had seen fire flame up in the meadow.

"What's that?" she asked Sue.

Her friend came to the window. "It's this side of the creek. See! The willows are behind it."

"One of the haystacks," Pattie decided. "I'll go see. The others may catch."

She caught up her cloak and ran out of the room. Sue followed more leisurely. Temperamentally, she was not so impetuous as Pattie. She saw Pattie running down the slope toward the blaze. The sky was red with the light thrown up from the shooting flames. Against the blackness beyond, the edge of the willows was sharply outlined.

Pattie had been right. A haystack was furnishing the fuel for the fire. She wondered how it could have been lit, and her quick mind found an answer. Truesdale's friends! But why? She could not find a reason.

But she knew Jim was in danger. If he should be caught unaware, his life might be snapped out before he had a chance to defend himself. She must get to him with a warning.

The girl turned to run to the house and presently met Sue.

"It's Truesdale's gang. I've got to tell Jim. I'm afraid," she cried.

What it was she was afraid of, she did not say. But it was not for herself. They would do her no harm, these men. She

was of no importance to them one way or the other just now.

To the girls drifted the sound of voices.

“They’re between us and the house, aren’t they?” Sue asked.

“Don’t know. We’d better go back by way of the grove. Whoever it is will be less likely to see us.”

They moved to the left toward the grove. By so doing, they missed meeting Jim. As they reached the first of the pines, a shot rang out. A cone, cut by the bullet, dropped at their feet.

Sue screamed. Someone had fired at them.

“You’d better get back into the trees, Sue,” her friend said.

Pattie herself started on a run toward the house. Beneath the shadow of the firs it was very dark, but Pattie had known the path since childhood and travelled fast. As she came into the open near the house, she became aware of moving figures, of saddled horses, of the crash of breaking windows. She hurried forward, ran up the steps, and passed into the house.

The door into the big room downstairs opened to her hand. She walked in and came to an abrupt stop. Jim was not in the room at all, but Tige Ball and Brad Reeves were. They had just finished cutting the ropes that bound the prisoners.

“Where’s Jim Turner? What have you done with him?” the girl demanded.

Truesdale strode forward and caught her wrist. “I’ll ask the questions, girl. You answer them.”

He had a revolver in his right hand.

“I suppose you’ll shoot me if I don’t,” she said scornfully.

“Don’t badger me, you poor fool,” the killer flung out savagely. “Where’s that girl Sue Tedrow?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“You lie. She’s somewheres around. I want her. Where

is she?" His fingers tightened on her wrist till she could have screamed with pain.

But the eyes that met his did not quail. "I don't know—and if I did I wouldn't tell you."

"By God, you will!"

The stubborn will in her set itself to meet the physical agony. "I'll not."

He ground his teeth furiously. "If you try to get in my way, girl——"

"You bully, if my uncle was here you wouldn't dare touch me," she taunted him.

Tige Ball interrupted. "Better leave the girl alone, Tom."

With a sweep of the arm, Truesdale flung Pattie against the wall. He turned on Ball. "Don't tell me what to do, Tige," he stormed. "I want Sue Tedrow. She's somewhere near. Find her for me."

Marshall whispered in his leader's ear, nodding toward Pattie as he did so.

"All right. See she don't get away from you," Truesdale growled, leading the way out of the house.

There came the sound of wagon wheels. A buckboard drew up at the corner of the house. Hughes Henry, the reins in his hands, descended to the ground. He saw Tom Truesdale on the porch, feet wide astraddle, head low and thrust forward, a revolver in his hand. Back of him was Tige Ball, and behind him, just emerging from the house, Sam Marshall holding Pattie by the arm.

At sight of her uncle, Pattie cried aloud his name. Hughes took in the situation at a glance.

"Hands off my girl," he ordered.

Marshall's hand dropped from Pattie's arm. Truesdale moved a step or two nearer Henry.

"Don't get on the prod, Hughes. I'll not stand for it. I

want the Tedrow girl, an' I aim to get her. Yore girl knows where she is.”

Hughes Henry dropped the reins, his right hand falling to the butt of a revolver strapped to his side.

Instantly Truesdale fired. Hughes staggered. His weapon came out and he fired from his hip. A second time Truesdale's gun blazed at him.

“Got him, by God!” the killer shouted.

From out of the darkness a man galloped.

“Bunch of riders comin' down from the ridge,” he shouted.

There was a stampede for the horses. Pattie, running down from the porch to her uncle's aid, met Truesdale face to face.

“You coward,” she cried, her eyes blazing out of a bloodless face. “You've killed him.”

Black Tom was drunk with the lust of battle. He did not think of consequences, of the future, but only of his savage desire to get the best of these enemies who harassed him and had brought him to the humiliation of temporary defeat. He snatched the girl to him, caught her up in his arms, and ran to the nearest horse. In another moment he was astride of it. His men were already galloping away. Truesdale followed, Pattie struggling in his arms.

They rode swiftly down the meadow, pushed into the willows, and splashed across the creek.

Sheriff Lutz and his posse reached the ranch just in time to be too late.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### CROOKED CAÑON

**A**T DONNELLY'S ranch, the posse drew up to gather what information it could. In spite of Hughes Henry's assurance that the ranchman Donnelly was wholly to be trusted, neither Jim nor Buck Sturgis was convinced that they were on the right trail. They wanted to talk with Donnelly and hear his story. It seemed strange that Truesdale would openly advertise his destination by practically shouting it aloud in the night.

Donnelly had nothing new to offer. He told his story again simply, and there was nothing to add to it.

"I done told Bob here all I know," he insisted. "I seen 'em, five of 'em, an' I heard their voices. Oncet when he talked I was pretty near sure of Tom Truesdale's. They were headed for the Flat Tops, looked like. That surprised me some, for Crooked Cañon is no trail to take on a dark night. Naturally, I wondered who they were an' where they were going. I started oncet to holler out, an' then I reckoned I'd better not. It's kinda been my motto to lay off'n night riders."

"Did they act like they were slippin' by an' didn't want to be noticed?" Jim asked.

"Well, no, I can't say they did. I had a lantern with me. They must 'a' seen it. But it didn't keep Tom Truesdale—if it was Tom, an' I'd bet my boots it was—from talkin' right out in meeting."

Buck Sturgis rasped his stubbly beard thoughtfully.

"You pays yore money an' takes yore choice, Sheriff," he suggested. "Either Tom didn't care a damn whether you knew where he was going, or else he wanted to be sure you did know."

"Looks thataway to me," Jim agreed.

"Bright idea, boy!" Lutz applauded with sarcasm. "Why for? He knew I was outside with a posse, ready to crowd him hard an' sleep right on his trail. Why would he announce where he was headin' for?"

"That's the question I'm askin' myself," Jim replied.

"Yes, an' what's the answer?" the sheriff jeered. It struck him this young fellow was taking a good deal on himself merely because by a piece of incredible good luck he had captured Truesdale and Marshall. After all, he had not been able to hold his prisoners, but had been outwitted and outmanœuvred.

"Like Mr. Sturgis says, you take yore choice," Jim replied. "Either he's gone crazy with the heat an' is invitin' you into the hills to fight it out with you, or else he isn't going where he lets on he's going."

"Meanin' that he was aimin' to back track on us," Sturgis put in. "Maybeso, at that. He tried that same trick before, right after the train robbery, an' he almost threw us off the trail. What about it, Donnelly? Could he start up thisaway an' then give us the slip by lightin' out for some other place to hole up?"

"Not unless he turned back through Crooked Cañon again. He wouldn't hardly do that. No sense to it. He'd be throwin' away time he can't afford to lose."

"He couldn't push on from the Eagle's Nest country into any other mountain district, could he?" asked Buck.

"No. If he keeps going, he'll come back into the ranch country."



"Then what's his play? Beats me."

Donnelly gave an opinion. "Why, if you knew Tom Truesdale like I do, you wouldn't need to ask that. He don't give a cuss who knows where he's gone. Tom's that-away. Likely he's hopin' you find him so as he can see it out with you to a fightin' finish. Course, he's got to make a bluff of hidin' out, or the rest of the gang wouldn't stick by him. I'll tell you another thing. He may turn on you any time. Among these rocks an' gulches he'll have plenty of chances. You want to travel with yore eyes wide open, Lutz."

The sheriff considered. "I'll leave a man here above the cañon to watch it. If Truesdale doubles back, our man can come after us an' let us know."

"Yes, if he ever found you. This country stands right up on end. It's full of gulches an' blind pockets. He might get lost for a week."

"Wish that moon would come out so we could get started," Bob murmured uneasily to Jim.

He could not bear to sit still in the saddle and lose precious hours. Nor could Jim. He, too, was tortured with anxiety on account of Pattie. To one thing he had made up his mind. Lutz was nominally leader of the posse. That was all right. He was a much older man, and he was sheriff of the county. He had ten times the experience of Jim.

But when it came to the final showdown with these outlaws, Jim did not intend to take orders. He was not a member of Lutz's posse, but was on special service with the rangers and therefore independent of the sheriff. As soon as they established contact with the bandits, he intended to go after them. If it was a fighting finish Truesdale wanted, he was going to be accommodated. Talking did not get anywhere. No use arguing with Lutz. Might as well

wait till the time for action came. He was not going to forget that he had first claim on Marshall because of Hal and on Truesdale because of Jack Lawrence.

Yet, even while he told himself this, Jim knew that the danger of Pattie Henry was a far more potent spring of action than either of these two. He loved her. He knew it now. And with that knowledge had vanished all the awe of Black Tom as a killer that had formerly obsessed him. The fellow was nothing but a criminal. He was no superman. Jim had bested him once, and he meant to do it again when the hour came.

The moon presently reappeared from behind scudding clouds and Bob Henry led the way into Crooked Cañon. Before they had travelled a quarter of a mile, the going became rough and steep. Boulders filled the bed of the stream which ran through the gorge, and much of the time no light whatever reached the bottom of the rift.

The riders almost groped their way. It was necessary at times to give the horses their head and let them pick a path for themselves. Once a cow pony went down, stumbling to its knees and flinging its rider into the bed of the creek. The man swore ruefully as he nursed the bruised forearm that had saved his head from contact with the rocks.

After three quarters of an hour of this, Lutz called a halt. "We're liable to get some arms an' legs busted if we keep followin' this narrow ledge. It's climbin' way up above the creek. How much more of it, Bob?"

"Maybe a half a mile or so. It's not so far to the Flat Tops where we can see." Bob's report was favourable because he wanted to keep on going. He was in a fever of impatience and fretted at every delay.

"Only half a mile—or so—maybe. An' gettin' steeper an' rougher every dawggoned minute," Sturgis grumbled cheer-

fully. "Lead on, son. I'm an old man an' won't live more'n thirty or forty years anyhow, even if I make the grade this trip."

Jim later went over that trail by daylight, and he wondered how they had ever negotiated it in utter darkness. Part of the way, the sloping pathway of the ledge was so narrow that there was scarce footing for a horse. The least misstep would have flung mount and rider into the chasm of the gorge below. Stones and boulders obstructed the line of march, and in places the ascent was so precipitous that a mountain goat might have hesitated. Yet the cow ponies of the posse, in the dead of night, had managed to clamber up, and so had those of the men they pursued.

When they reached the Flat Tops, the travelling was easier. The terrain was rough enough, but at least the riders did not have the dread of plunging down a hundred feet to the rocky bed of a stream.

Daybreak found them far up in the high mountains, lost for the time in a heavy mist which penetrated chilly to their bones.

"We'll throw off here an' make camp till the fog lifts," the sheriff announced. "I'll feel better after I get outside of some hot coffee an' grub."

They lit a fire and cooked breakfast. It fretted Jim to have to wait, but he recognized the wisdom of making haste slowly. They had, in any case, to eat, and it would save time to get it over with before the mist lifted.

Around a camp fire they breakfasted. The men joked each other about the experiences of the night and speculated as to the whereabouts of the outlaws and the probability of running into them.

The fog still hung heavy after they had eaten.

"Can't do a thing till it lifts," Lutz said. "You boys bet-

ter grab what sleep you can. No tellin' when you'll get yore next chance."

Jim offered to keep watch against the millionth chance of a surprise attack. "I couldn't sleep anyhow," he said. "No point in keepin' anybody else awake."

He roused the others two hours later. The fog was lifting. Came presently a faint gleam of sunshine. They saddled and packed, by which time the mist was retreating to the pockets at the foot of the peaks which ran like sentinels to their left.

The sun grew warmer. Some of the posse offered nervous but apparently casual predictions that they would soon come up with the outlaws.

"Hmp!" grunted Buck Sturgis. "You lads make me laugh. Black Tom is nobody's fool. He's been runnin' around these hills for thirty years, an' he knows every trick of the game. Right now he may be lying up on that ledge there laughin' at us. I'll bet he's got a better notion of where we are than we have where he's at. Why, he could keep on the dodge here in these hills for a week an' us never lay eyes on him onless we jest plumb stumbled on him."

Jim recognized the truth of this. It was even possible that they were following a wild-goose chase and that the outlaws were not headed for the Eagle's Nest at all. His heart was heavy. He thought of Pattie in the hands of these villains, and when he did so the bottom dropped out of his courage.

He kept bolstering up his spirit with the assurance that they dared not hurt her. They dared not—if they valued their lives. The trouble was that Tom Truesdale did not value his, and that Marshall would strike at her only when he saw a chance to do so safely.

But if that chance came——

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### JIM CUTS LOOSE

**I**T WAS the fourth day of the man hunt. The posse had climbed hills, slithered down into draws, searched gulches. The terrain around the Eagle's Nest had been combed as riders do the range on a round-up. No trace of the outlaws had been seen, not even a wisp of smoke rising from a distant wooded slope.

This morning, Jim and Bob had clambered to the summit of the great cliff which gave the place its name. They stood on the edge of the bluff, sweeping with their eyes the reaches of forest below.

Bob let his discouragement escape into words. "They fooled us, looks like. We've sure hunted thorough as we could, but they might be holed up in some pocket or draw right close to us."

"Yes," Jim agreed absently.

He was brooding over the situation, and as he did so he came to a decision. It was this, that he was not going to hunt in such a large party, and that he would do his searching in the Barlow Park country and not here.

"I can't get Pattie outa my mind," Bob said hopelessly. "How can I go back to Uncle Hughes an' tell him we fell down on this round-up?"

Jim offered arguments that did not convince himself. "Black Tom will look out for her. He's one tough nut, the worst kind of a killer, one way of speakin', but I don't reckon he would harm Pattie."

"How do we know that? He may be drinking, an' if he is, likely he'll get to figurin' on how to get even with us all. He an' Pattie never did get along. He said more'n once he'd like to have the runnin' of her so as to break her spirit. Then there's Marshall. He hates the whole caboodle of us. He'll not forget how Uncle Hughes quirted him till he yelped for mercy. Give him a chance, he'll sure take it outa Pattie."

"He'll not get the chance," Jim valiantly assured the harassed brother. "Tige Ball is there, an' this fellow Reeves. They are not plumb fools, either one of 'em. D'ja reckon they would sit by an' let Marshall devil her? Not on yore life. They know, if they did, this country would hunt 'em down like wolves. Besides, they are men, both of 'em, neighbours of yours. I've heard yore uncle say that Tige is a hardy devil. Betcha he'd fight at the drop of the hat for Pattie, if it came to a showdown."

"Against Marshall, maybe, but not against Tom Truesdale."

"Against either or both of 'em." Jim's thoughts recurred to that aspect of the case upon which he had been deliberating. "We're not gettin' anywhere, Bob. These fellows may be up in this neck of the woods, but I don't believe it. First place, they came up here too openly. A trick, looks like, to throw us off the scent. We've hunted thorough, an' we haven't seen hide nor hair of them. No smoke from their camp fires. No tracks. No signs of their stock. Why? Because they ain't here."

"But we know they headed this way. Donnelly wasn't lying to us."

"No, they used him to trick us, I expect. I never was satisfied they were here. This country we've been coverin' is a big pocket. If they got penned up, there's no way out

except into settled valleys. The Barlow Park country is different. Hardly anybody lives there, an' it leads anywhere—to Old Mex say, when they're ready to make a break through. Why would they come here instead of going there?"

"No use beefin' about whyfors. They did come here. We know that."

"They came through the cañon. We know that. But did they stay? Isn't there any possible trail across to Barlow Park from the Flat Tops?"

"Across the mountains?" Bob looked at him, startled to attention.

"Yes, across the mountains. They didn't go back through the cañon. We know that. How about some pass leadin' across?"

"Why, it's been done. Tom Truesdale an' Uncle Hughes made it oncet twenty years ago. They started right close to the cañon end of the Flat Tops. They kinda had to hang on by their eyebrows. I don't reckon Truesdale would tackle it with so big a party an' one of them a woman."

"If I had a thousand dollars, I'd bet it he tried just that an' got across. Pat can go anywheres a man can, an' Tom Truesdale knows it. We're foolin' away our time here."

"Lutz says——"

"I know what Lutz says, that they're on the dodge right here. He's a stubborn Dutchman, an' he takes a lot of convincin'. Different here. I'm going over to Barlow Park, an' I'm going over the mountains, same way they went."

"Me, too," Bob cried.

"If my hunch looks good to you. This party is too big. We advertise every move we make. Even if Truesdale's gang was here, those fellows could slip away an' sidestep us,



unless we were lucky enough to surprise them, jump 'em up at their camp, say."

"Something to that," Bob admitted.

"A lot to it. So we'll travel alone, just you an' me. Betcha we strike a lead over there in Barlow Park. Are you acquainted with any ranchmen there?"

"Yep. With old Bart Castleman. We've been at his place, all of us. He's right friendly with Uncle Hughes."

"Then we'll hit the trail *muy pronto*, boy."

"What will Lutz say?"

"Only that we're darned fools. He's pretty near ready to quit anyhow. A coupla days more will be enough for him."

They descended, following the shoulder of the cliff, to the place where they had left the rest of the posse.

"Couldn't see a sign of them," Jim reported.

"We'll comb that south gulch again," Lutz decided.

Jim told him of the plan formed by him and Bob.

The sheriff barked a short sarcastic laugh. "You're a cocksure young devil, Turner. I'll say that for you. But suit yoreself. I've got no kick comin' if you lads want to go rampin' over the mountains on a cold trail. You won't find Black Tom's gang, an' that'll be lucky for you. If I figured there was a chance on earth of you fellows meetin' up with these birds, I wouldn't let you go a foot of the way. They would eat you alive."

The bright eyes in Buck Sturgis's brown, leathery face took in Jim with shrewd approval. He did not share his chief's opinion of this young fellow. Anyone who could, with or without luck, arrest Marshall and Truesdale single-handed and drag them in as prisoners would do to watch.

"What do you aim to do if you find Truesdale, Jim?" the old frontiersman asked.

"Why, we could come back an' let you know where they're at," Jim said innocently.

"So you could." Buck grinned appreciatively. It was his opinion that Jim Turner would not do any such thing. "Only be sure he don't find you, too, because if you an' Mr. Bear get too close, you may have to holler for us to help you turn him loose. An' be mighty careful not to start any powwow like Lawrence an' Hughes Henry did."

"I never was any good a-tall at oratin'," Jim answered.

Sturgis patted the weapon in his sagging belt. "Me, I'll take my own advice, if it comes to a showdown. I've got no notion of givin' these birds an even break. None of this 'So long, Tom, how're you feelin' this glad day' stuff. No, *sir*. When I meet Tom, I'll let li'l' old Tried an' True do the talkin' for me. I'll go to fannin' smoke right away *pronto* sudden immediate from the word go. Either that or me for the tall timber, an' I reckon I'm too old an' logy to travel faster than Tom's bullets."

"Hmp!" grunted the sheriff. "We ain't any of us gonna get a chance to meet him, looks like."

"Might be something to Jim's notion," Sturgis went on. "Why haven't we bumped into Mr. Black Tom an' his friends? Maybe it's because he's not here, him or any of his outfit. I never was satisfied we were on a hot trail."

"Easy to say 'I told you so,'" Lutz growled. "Maybe you think you would have done better in my place, Buck."

"Not a bit," admitted the deputy cheerfully. "You're major-domo of this outfit, an' you've done all that could have been done so far. But we've about reached the end of our rope here. They've sure outguessed us to date. If they are in this Eagle's Nest country, they must have gone into a hole an' pulled it in after them. Well, why not try this hunch Jim has got? Barlow Park sounds good to me. Why not

let these lads cross the mountain while we swing round by way of Lost Park, us pickin' up what information we can on the way. We can meet at Castleman's ranch, say."

"I'm not satisfied they're not here," the sheriff replied obstinately. "Maybe in a coupla days I'll talk Barlow Park with you."

So it was settled that Jim and Bob should be free to do as they pleased. Inside of an hour, they had eaten, saddled, packed, and were headed for the Flat Tops.

## CHAPTER XL

### TIGE BALL SPEAKS OUT

PATTIE sat on a flat rock which outcropped from a hill-ock sixty feet from the camp. Her chin was cupped despondently in the palm of a hand. It was the sixth day since Truesdale had flung her across the saddle in front of him. They had been days of hard travel, including one dangerous ten-hour traverse of a steep and rocky range, and after each day there had been anxious hours of worry before she could fall asleep.

Black Tom had not deigned to tell her what he meant to do with her. Perhaps he did not know himself. He had been full of a dark and bitter moodiness, probably because he could not get out of his mind the galling humiliation of the hours when he had been the prisoner of Jim Turner. The man's savage pride had been hurt, and he longed for a chance to wipe out the stain of defeat. Mostly he was silent, but it was plain that the thoughts behind his dark and swarthy face were not pleasant ones.

She had begged him to let her go home, and he had brushed aside her petitions roughly. It was dangerous to hold her. For that very reason he would not let her go. He would show Hughes Henry—if Hughes were still alive—and these hounds of the law with whom he had allied himself, that they could not play monkey tricks with Tom Truesdale.

Already he had the laugh on Lutz. He had lain on a ledge in the darkness and heard the posse pass below him on its

futile way to Eagle's Nest. Already he had punished the ranger Lawrence and Hughes Henry for their temerity in facing him. But he would not be satisfied until he had killed the young cockerel Turner. His own inclination was to turn on his pursuers and hunt this cowboy down, but he realized that his followers would not stand for that.

As Truesdale came out from the live-oak grove where the horses were tied, he saw that Tige Ball had joined Pattie where she sat on the rock hill. Black Tom scowled. Tige was uneasy because of the girl's presence, and he had more than once protested to his leader. If it had not been for sheer obstinacy, Tom would have sent her back to Lost Park with Tige. She was both a danger and an inconvenience. But he did not intend to let anybody dictate to him what he should do.

Now he went striding forward to join the man and the girl.

"Startin' in for to be a lady's man, Tige," he jeered. "First thing, Sam will be gettin' jealous. Can' have that happenin', lovely lady. Have to send you home if you start to flirtin' with the boys. Either that or marry you myself to keep the peace."

She ignored his ironic sneer. "Send me home," she begged. "Or give me a horse and let me go by myself. I want to get back. I'm worried—about Uncle Hughes. I ought to be there."

"If you hadn't taken up with that spy Turner, you wouldn't need to be worryin' about him. I told you how it would be, but you were hell-bent to have yore own way. You've got nobody to blame but yoreself."

"I'm not asking for myself." Her throat filled up for a moment. "But Uncle Hughes may need me. If you'll let me go home, I'll never forget it."

"I'll let you go when I'm good an' ready," Truesdale told her gruffly.

"Tige says you ought to let me go," she pleaded. "I'm only a girl, Tom. You've known me ever since I was a baby. I'd think you'd want——"

"So Tige says I oughtta let you go, does he?"

Ball answered for himself: "Tha's what I told her, Tom, an' it's what I told you. If you'd look at this right, you'd see we've got no business keepin' her here. Why, dad gum it, she's one of our neighbours' girls. Like she said, we've known her since she learned to walk. I've carried her in my arms when she was a baby, an' I'll be damned if I'll stand for any harm comin' to her."

Hard-eyed, Truesdale looked at him steadily. "You talk mighty brave, Tige."

The other outlaw did not flinch. "Might as well get down to cases, Tom. We're where we've got to hang together. I'm with you till the cows come home, long as you're any-ways reasonable. You know it. You know I'll take my fightin' chance with you. I've travelled a lot of crooked trails in my time. But I claim to be a white man. I'll not stand for any harm comin' to Pat Hughes. There you've got it, short an' sweet."

Truesdale struggled with his temper. The eyes in his dark, saturnine face told as much. Ball faced him hardily. He knew that his life lay on the incalculable chance of the killer's self-control. Of late the man had been morose and quarrelsome. What he might do now was wholly uncertain.

What he did was to swallow his overbearing pride, his rising resentment.

"Don't run on the rope, Tige," he growled sulkily. "I wouldn't stand for having the girl harmed any more than you would. But I'll not let you or her either dictate to me.

I'll stand pat on what I said before. She'll go home when it's convenient for me to send her—an' not before."

Ball had made his protest. He had declared himself, at a very considerable risk. If it came to a showdown, he was ready to fight for the girl. But it had not come to such a pass and probably never would. Truesdale evidently had no intention of injuring her. No use pushing him too far. He had made a larger concession than Tige had expected that he would. Let it go at that. For the present, anyhow.

Tige's protest was therefore only perfunctory. "That's all right, Tom. I'm not tryin' to run you. All I say is that we're not fightin' women, an' Pat has lots of friends an' there's no sense in lookin' for more trouble when we've got all we can handle right now. When you get ready to send her home, I'll be glad to see her go."

"I'd never have brought her if she hadn't been so bossy," Truesdale declared bitterly. "She ran Hughes, an' look what came of it. She took up with this spy Turner, and broke up the friendship between Hughes an' me. It was through her Lutz an' his posse came into the park."

"It wasn't either," she denied. "I hadn't a thing to do with it. I didn't know they were coming."

"If you hadn't made Hughes so soft with this Turner, the spy couldn't of guided Lutz in. Girl, you can cry yore fool head off. Some grief was comin' to you, the way you acted."

A man rode into view up the rocky path.

"Sam Marshall," said Ball.

The rider came at a canter. He flung himself from the saddle at the same instant the horse stopped.

"Strangers at Castleman's ranch," he announced.

"Know who they are?" demanded Truesdale.

"No. Didn't want to get too close so they would see me. But I reckon they're some of Lutz's posse."



“I’ll ride down an’ find out,” Truesdale said. “You an’ Reeves will go with me, Tige, if that suits you.”

He felt that nothing would soothe his riled temper more than a brush with these busybodies who insisted on interfering with him. If young Turner was with them, so much the better.

## CHAPTER XLI

### BELOW THE RIM ROCK

**J**IM and Bob reached the Castleman ranch after a very hard trip across the mountains. They had got lost up in the high hills and had spent a night and two days there before they could find a pass that could be negotiated. The night had been bitterly cold, and they had been able to snatch only an hour or two of uneasy sleep. Therefore, they were fagged out when they reached the ranch.

But there was one compensation. They knew they were on the trail of the outlaws. They had read sign in four or five places which showed that a party had preceded them over the pass.

Tired though they were, Jim decided not to sleep at the ranch. It was very likely that Truesdale kept contact established with Castleman's to have a check on any pursuers who might come into the park.

The two spent riders sat down to dinner with the ranchman's family. There were three stalwart Castleman sons and a pretty girl of about Pattie's age. They called her Mollie. She waited on the table while her men folks and the guests ate.

Jim dropped casual questions and comments designed to elicit information. A certain wariness in the replies of the Castlemans told him more than their words.

"Reckon you don't see many strangers in this neck of the woods," Jim suggested.

"Not many," old Bart agreed.

"Probably we're the first visitors you've had for quite some time."

"Came over the mountains from the Eagle's Nest country, you said, didn't you?"

"Yep. Kinda looked by the tracks as if some party had crossed ahead of us."

The old rancher was slightly deaf. Now he turned this liability into an asset. He heard as much as he wanted to and no more.

"Party! Was it a dance? Down in Lost Park?"

"I said we weren't the only folks that had come over the hills, looked like."

"Came over with Bill who?"

One of the young Castlemans snorted. "The old man is deeper than he usta be," he explained.

"He seems to be right deaf. It's an affliction." Jim poured molasses over his biscuit and dropped a piece of news. "Expect you've heard that Tom Truesdale shot Hughes Henry."

Bart forgot his deafness. "Shot Hughes Henry! When?" he demanded, astonished.

Jim gave details in the hope of loosening the old man's tongue. These had the effect of making him more cautious. He had no intention of getting mixed up in the row. While he cared nothing about Truesdale and his outfit, he knew it was not safe to give any news about them to their pursuers.

After dinner, Jim and Bob rode away. Somewhere in the rough country near they would find a camping ground.

As they moved through the chaparral a voice hailed them. Mollie Castleman came forward.

"You boys are lookin' for Black Tom's outfit, aren't you?" she asked.

Jim did not beat about the bush. "That's what, Miss Mollie."

"They're back in the rock rim somewheres. My brother Lyn says they've got Pattie Hughes with them. Is yore posse in the brush near here?"

"Not so awful close," Jim hedged. He knew this girl was on his side. His instinct told him that. But he did not know how discreet she might be. "Do you know where Black Tom is camped?"

"Not exactly. About two-three miles from the ranch, I reckon. Northeast, I'd say. It's right rocky up thataway. Are you aimin' to get Black Tom or just to take Pattie home?"

"We want her first. That's most important. If there's any way you can help us——"

"I would if I could. It's outrageous of them to take her with them. But that Black Tom. He's awful. Still, I don't see what I can do." The girl's dark eyes pitied Bob. "You're her brother, aren't you? I know how you must feel."

"You might pick up some news," Jim said. "Some of Truesdale's men may come down to the ranch. Let me know if they do."

"Yes," she said dubiously. Then, in a little burst of confidence, "I'd like to help Pattie Hughes. Once I stayed at her house for a week. I like her. But Father wouldn't like it. He says it's better to keep out of this. He says it's not safe to make Black Tom mad. Still an' all, I'll let you know if there's anything comes up. Where will you be?"

"We'll be out here in the chaparral. Give us a hail an' we'll come out to meet you. An' if you want to know what Bob an' I think of you, why you're all wool an' a yard wide."

"Thank you." She made a mocking little curtsy. "An'

in return for yore compliment I'll give you some good advice, both of you. Keep away from Black Tom an' let Sheriff Lutz meet him. He'd just make mincemeat of you nice boys."

With which she left them.

But inside of an hour they heard her "You-hoo!" and came forward to meet her. She had brought news. Black Tom with two of his men had come down to the ranch and was now there with her father. One of his scouts had informed him of the arrival of strangers, and he had ridden in to find out who they were.

"Did he say what he was going to do—whether he would start lookin' for us right away?"

"He swore something awful when he heard it was you had ridden into the park. It gave me the shivers to hear him. You'd better look out."

"Much obliged, Miss Mollie," Jim said. "But it's no news to me that he doesn't like me. I'd kinda suspected it. Was he still at the ranch when you left?"

"Umpha! He went into the house with Father. They're gonna comb the chaparral for you. If I was you, I'd certainly light out an' keep going till I had met up with the rest of the posse. If he caught you two boys alone——"

She left the rest to their imagination.

"Good medicine," agreed Jim. "We'll hit the trail *mu*y *pronto*. Now, you better slip back home, Miss Mollie, before yore father misses you. We don't want you gettin' in trouble on account of being friendly with us."

The young men were in their saddles before she was out of sight.

"Where are we headin' for?" Bob asked.

"For the edge of the rim rock. My idea is to leave you

there in the brush while I go ahead on foot an' find out what I can."

They stopped in an arroyo filled with aspens. Here Jim left the horses with his friend. He moved forward to the rock rim and climbed it, going as fast as he could consistent with a reasonable amount of caution. For ten or fifteen minutes he advanced, crouching low and taking advantage of what cover there was. It was necessary to take the risk of being seen if he hoped to reach the outlaw camp while Truesdale and his two associates were away.

Presently, from the edge of a ledge, he peered down on what he knew must be the spot where the outlaws were camped. Under a live oak two horses stood drowsing in the warm sunshine. Saddles, bridles, and gunny sacks lay scattered near. He could see the black charcoal of the dead camp fire. But from where he lay he could not see any person. A ridge of higher ground ran parallel to the ledge on which he lay and back of the camp fire. It was possible that Pattie and her guard might be on the other side of it. He slipped down the broken rocks to the sandy level below, keeping a careful watch against surprise.

Voices reached him from the other side of the ridge, one of them heavy and menacing, the other clear and indignant. At sound of them, his blood quickened. He knew that Sam Marshall and Pattie Hughes were moving toward him, that in another moment or two they would come into view.

There would be instant explosive battle. Instinctively, his brain functioned for defence and attack. He made sure of his rifle and waited, tensely, one foot resting on a large log in front of him.

Above the crest of the hill appeared the heads of the man and the girl. They were close together. Yet another mo-

ment, and Jim saw that Marshall had his left arm tucked under the right arm of Pattie and that his fingers were fastened to her wrist.

"You'd better let me go, you brute, if you know what's good for you," she warned, her voice high with excitement.

"Hold yore horses, sweetheart," he jeered. "I'm runnin' this rodeo, an' don't you forget it, you li'l' catamount. That bullyin' uncle of yours ain't here, nor that damfool pilgrim Turner——"

Then, swifter than words can tell it, the long-deferred crisis leaped upon them. Pattie caught sight of Jim and cried out her astonishment. The young man had his one instant of time advantage, but he could not use it. He dared not fire, lest he hit the girl.

Sam Marshall's "Goddlemighty!" fell snarling from his lips as his revolver leaped to the air.

The outlaw's weapon rang out.

For an eyebeat Jim stood staring at him, the young man's face a map of puzzled dismay. The rifle clattered from his hands. He half turned. His body sagged. He went plunging down behind the log.



## CHAPTER XLII

### AT LONG LAST

MARSHALL could scarcely believe his luck. It had been a swift shot from the hip with no chance to take aim. Yet he had dropped his enemy. He stood looking at the spot where the young man had been and now was not. Triumph surged up in him, drove from his face the first momentary expression of heavy bewilderment.

"Got him," he screamed, adding an oath that was a whoop of joy. "Bumped him off. Told the idjit I would. Told Sam so. Told you an' yore interferin' uncle. An' I done it, too."

He straddled forward, beside himself with exultation. He had no least doubt but that he had got his man. Yet the cautious instinct for saving his own skin asserted itself. The man might not be dead yet, and dying men sometimes sent swift messages of vengeance. Life still might be flickering in him, even though his rifle, pitched at an angle where it had been flung by the jerk of involuntary muscles, lay on this side of the log with barrel pointing downward. The outlaw meant for good measure to fling a couple of extra bullets into the prone body. In days past, he had once given it as a maxim to his cronies that you can't kill a man too dead. That was still his opinion.

The body lay out of sight behind the log, and the approach to it was awkward. At each end of the log grew a heavy screen of shrubbery. Marshall hesitated, then made his

choice. He moved toward the less dense bushes at the left.

"You've killed him!" Pattie cried.

For an instant she had been palsied by horror, but now she was running swiftly, straight for the log.

"Come back, girl," the outlaw ordered. "Goddlemighty! Come back or I'll fire."

She paid not the least attention to his command, none to his threat. Her flying limbs took the log in their stride. A gasp was shocked from her throat as she sank down to the sand, and hard after this a quavering cry, "He's dead."

So he was dead? Marshall changed his mind. He walked straight for the log, the revolver held close to his side. He stepped upon the dead tree and looked down.

There is a saying among the three-shell gentry that the hand is quicker than the eye. The very instant that Marshall stepped upon the log fingers encircled his ankle and dragged him forward. Even before he fell into the arms of the man waiting for him the bandit knew that his enemy had trapped him. As he went down he tried in panicky fashion for a shot.

He never had a chance to fire. One of Jim's hands closed on the right wrist of his foe, the other encircled the heavy shoulders of the squat bandit. With one tremendous heave the young man flung his enemy against the log, back down. The impact of the fall knocked the breath out of Marshall. Jim's right hand caught the man by the hair and dragged his head backward.

The murderer was stretched helplessly against the log, his spine tortured by the pressure of the cow-puncher's body. He had no chance to use his superior strength. His eyes, meeting those of his foe, reflected a ghastly fear. The slightest extra pressure of the fingers dragging at his hair would break his neck. All the fury of fight had been driven

out of him. Only the terror in the eyes showed the vitality of life. He could neither cry out nor whisper an appeal for mercy.

Slowly, inch by inch, the outflung arm with the revolver began to bend beneath the pressure of the muscular fingers that gripped the wrist. It swung in a semicircle until the rim of the barrel rested against the outlaw's temple.

Neither of the men moved. They lay there, eye to eye, engaged in an awful struggle of the will. Marshall was a defenceless victim of inexorable Nemesis. He knew the end of life had come for him and that he was being offered a choice. The spasmodic croak of his own forefinger would be enough, or if he had not the courage for that the downward push of the arm the fingers of which gripped his hair.

The doomed man made his choice. . . .

Jim rose, his whole body mired with the shock of what had occurred. Sick and trembling, he stared down at the huddled figure which a moment before had been a breathing man. A thin film of smoke rose from the barrel of the weapon.

"My God! My God!" he shuddered.

The girl recovered herself first. "You had to do it," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Yes—yes—I daren't let him live, but——"

"You're not to blame, Jin."

"No—he brought it on himself. It had to be."

Courage flowed back into her body. "You were that cool—making him think he had killed you."

"I couldn't get a shot at him, where he stood behind you and so close to you. But it was you that was cool. When you found me ready for him and cried out that I was dead."

She drew a long ragged breath. "I thought till then that—that he had killed you."

Presently they came to consideration of the course of action best to pursue. He explained that her brother was waiting for them, at the same time busy saddling a horse for her.

They talked, as he walked beside the animal she rode. She asked about her uncle and was profoundly relieved to know that he would recover from the wound inflicted on him by Truesdale.

Bob was waiting in the arroyo of aspens. At sight of his sister, the boy's face worked with emotion. He had all he could do to keep from joining in her tears when she flew into his arms. He gulped a sob down, boyishly, ashamed of his emotion. She had been in danger, in the hands of an enemy who had no mercy in his heart. Now she was with him again, safe and sound.

The same emotions moved Jim, together with other more complicated ones. He was no more clear as to his faith than the average cowboy, but in simple childlike fashion he thanked God that he had been permitted to rescue her. It was wonderful to have her riding beside him, knee to knee, to see her brown face, with freckles sprinkled lightly above the straight nose, turned toward him eagerly. There were gifts of love in the deep soft eyes. Jim's heart sang within him, gay, brave little songs such as the meadow lark flings out in spring mornings of sunshine.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### WITH HIS BOOTS ON

THEY rode through the chaparral, the three of them, threading their way among mesquite bushes and clumps of clutching cactus. When any of them spoke, it was in undertones, for it was likely that Truesdale and his associates were searching for the two young men.

Jim was anxious to escape without battle. He was shaken by what had taken place. So far, his luck had stood up fine, but he did not want to press it too far. The most important thing was to get Pattie back to the ranch in safety. The law could wait to get Black Tom, and Jim was privately resolved that, if he could slip down into Lost Park, he would in future give the killer a wide berth.

The hardbitten frontier had been Jim's school. He was no soft-hearted fool. Sam Marshall was better dead than alive. He had at last paid the penalty of a lifetime of crime and evil doing. But it would take Jim some time to forget the look of paralyzed fear in the fellow's eyes during those few moments before death reached out and claimed him for its own.

The exultation of the lover had died down within him and given place to apprehension. All he desired now was to get back to Lost Park without meeting Black Tom or his men.

"We'll keep among these low hills not too close to the ridge," Jim said once. "The brush is thicker here, an' there is less chance of their jumpin' us."

The little cavalcade covered a tortuous mile, and still another. In front of them rose the rock walls of the pass. If they reached it, the chances were that they would be safe. From Jim's heart the weight began to lift. Soon, now, if all went well, they would be riding down the heavily wooded gulch which led to Lost Park.

The chaparral was thinning as they climbed to the pass. It grew scrubbier. In place of it appeared outcroppings of rocks. The valley was pinching out.

Jim was riding fifty yards in front of the others. He had told them to lie low in case of trouble, and to watch for a chance of escape. If they heard firing, they were not on any account to ride forward to assist him. That was imperative. It would do him no good and would endanger them.

His glance swept the entrance to the pass as he topped a rise, and his pulse leaped to excitement. Tom Truesdale was there, on horseback, a rifle in his hands. Evidently he was holding the gateway of escape in the expectation that his men would drive Jim toward him.

It was a split second before the killer saw the young man, and so much advantage Jim had. The shock of the adventure unsteadied Jim. Before the echoes of his shot had died down, the horse of Truesdale, wounded in the flank, had flung its rider, and Black Tom had reached the shelter of a boulder.

Jim swung from the saddle and raced for cover. He found it, behind the gnarled trunk of a live oak, but not before a bullet sang past him as he scudded for the tree.

A narrow arroyo, not more than two or three feet deep, ran from the roots of the live oak. From where he lay, Jim could not see the outlaw or be seen by him unless one of them exposed himself. If Jim could have trusted Pattie

to do as he had told her, he would have waited patiently for his chance. But he knew her impulsiveness and was afraid that she would come running into the danger zone.

Jim crept along the arroyo for seven or eight yards, then cautiously peered through a clump of cactus, his eyes searching for Truesdale. Simultaneously, there came the crack of a rifle. A bark chip flew from the trunk of the live oak. The bandit evidently thought his foe was still behind the tree.

Truesdale's shot told Jim exactly where Black Tom was lying. He was crouched behind a rock spur, close to the smooth face of a granite wall which rose at the entrance to the pass. Not an inch of the man's body was visible.

Jim's moment of panic was past. He was as cool as any old-timer could have been, and his brain was functioning with swift clarity. Why not try a ricochet shot? He had heard Hughes Henry tell of such a shot killing, by sheer chance, an Apache stalking a ranchman. If it could be done by chance, why not by design?

The young man took very careful aim at the face of rock and fired. He had been able to do so without exposing himself to return fire.

The spit of the bullet as it struck the sand told him that he must allow for a more obtuse angle than he had expected. He drew another bead on the rock wall. Truesdale's shot anticipated his, and a spurt of dirt flew over his head.

The echoes of Jim's third shot came booming back to him. From the rocks at the opening of the pass a man rose and came lurching forward.

"Come out an' fight, you damn spy," Truesdale roared.

By the man's zigzag course Jim believed that he was wounded. But it might be a trap. The young man took



careful aim and sent another bullet winging across the desert.

Truesdale staggered, came on another step or two, tripped over his own feet, and plunged to the ground.

Even now, remembering how he had trapped Marshall, Jim would have taken no chances if he had not seen Pattie running forward, if he had not heard her fear-filled voice calling him. Jim could not get another shot at Truesdale in the slight hollow where he lay, and he dared not wait till Pattie reached him. He rose and ran toward the fallen man, moving with a crouched, tense watchfulness.

Jim stopped. Truesdale had raised himself on an elbow, dragging himself up with extreme difficulty. Somehow, he managed to raise his heavy revolver, though it swayed drunkenly. Before Jim could fire, two explosions rang out, the two sounding almost like one.

It was the man's dying effort. Only his gameness, his stubborn will to kill, had made it possible for him to send those wild bullets from the weapon. His head sank down, and he lay in a huddled heap.

Black Tom Truesdale had come to the end of his trail. Jim knew it. Yet he relaxed his wariness not at all. His eyes never lifted from the supine figure lying on the ground beside a spiked niggerhead.

He did not turn at sound of Bob's excited voice, at Pattie's shrill demand to know whether he had been hurt. Slowly, watchfully, he moved forward till he stood above the man who had been Arizona's most notorious killer.

The arms lay extended, the limp fingers of one hand still curled around the butt of the Colt's.

"See if his heart is beating," Jim said quietly to Bob, his weapon still covering the lax figure.

Bob's fingers trembled as they searched beneath the man's clothing. He nodded presently.

"You sure got him, Jim," he said, and his voice was shaking.

Jim made no comment, unless it was one to say, in a throaty voice, "Let's get outa here—quick."

They mounted, rode into the pass, through it, and into the timber of the descent which led them to Lost Park.

Not till they reached the Henry ranch and found the sheriff's posse there did Jim breathe easily. He had expected the challenge of the two remaining outlaws, and for one day he had burnt all the powder he wanted to.

## CHAPTER XLIV

### TRAIL'S END

**B**UCK STURGIS bowlegged forward. "By gum, if it ain't young Hellamile, sure as I'm a foot high. What's new in Lost Park, boy?"

"We found Miss Henry," Jim said simply.

The old-timer's bright eyes gleamed. "You don't say! This the lady, I reckon. Pleased to death to meet you, ma'am."

Pattie was slipping from the saddle. "How's Uncle Hughes?" she asked breathlessly.

"Fine as the wheat. Rarin' like a wild colt because we didn't find you. He'll sure be plumb tickled to meet up with you."

Already Pattie was flying into the house to her uncle's room. On the way, she passed Sheriff Lutz coming out. Sturgis called to his chief, jocosely, in his lazy drawl.

"Here's yore plugged nickel back again, Lutz, looks like. He chasséd into the young lady an' brought her back with him."

"That ain't all," burst out Bob, no longer able to contain the news. "He jumped Sam Marshall an' Tom Truesdale, an' sent 'em both to kingdom come."

"What!" ejaculated the sheriff, dumbfounded. "What's that?"

"Like I say. Jim got 'em both. It's high, low, jack, an' the game with him."

"Got 'em? You mean killed them—Marshall an' Truesdale both?" Lutz demanded.

"Bet yore boots!" The boy began to get expansive as his admiration burgeoned into words. "Got 'em both, clean as a whistle. Those bad hombres weren't one-two-three when Jim began to fan smoke. I wasn't there when he got Marshall, but I was when he dropped Truesdale. He was that cool, that game. Black Tom didn't have a look-in."

"Dawg my cats!" broke in Buck Sturgis. "Spill yore story, boy. Onload it quick. How, where, an' when?"

"Not much to tell," Jim said, embarrassed. "I had luck."

"I'll say you did," Buck agreed. "Anyone who mixed it with Black Tom an' come out alive had luck—gilt-edged luck, too. I ain't disputin' that none. But tell us about it."

"Why, I seen him first an' dropped his horse. We both ran for cover. He was in the rocks, an' I took a whirl at a ricochet shot. Second time I hit him. He come runnin' out an' wanted me to fight in the open. Then I drilled him. Nothin' more to it."

"There was, too," denied Bob. "You ran out, an' he took two cracks at you with his six gun."

"That's so, too, but he was most dead when he fired them. If it hadn't been for that ricochet shot, a plumb lucky accident——"

"Hmp!" grunted Buck. "You *made* that accident happen, didn't you, boy? Dawggone my skin, I never heard tell of the beat of it. Marshall an' Truesdale both. An' you a kid still. You're sure the go-get-'em guy. The Lost Park gang is a busted flush now."

"Sure you killed both of them?" asked the sheriff. This

was a story difficult to accept. It had improbability written all over it.

"I didn't kill Marshall. He shot himself," Jim said.

Bob looked at the sheriff, triumph riding in his dark eyes. He was thinking that Lutz had jeered at his friend Jim and his plans.

"They'll never be deader, either of 'em," he said.

"How'd you mean shot himself?" Lutz asked.

Jim told the story briefly. Buck looked at him with shining-eyed admiration. He had lived his life on the frontier and had known many bad men and many desperate encounters, but he had never known anything like this before.

"You sure take the watch, boy. Got 'em, by gum, spite of hell an' high water."

Jim was taken into the house, to tell his story again. He found in the big room downstairs Hughes Henry and Jack Lawrence. Both of them were on the road to recovery.

What Jim had to say was said in a few sentences, but Bob and Pattie were present to elaborate the theme. This they did, with enthusiasm so exuberant that he blushed with shame.

"Sho! I jest happened to be Johnnie-on-the-spot," he demurred. "An' my luck stood up fine, like I keep tellin' you."

He reached into his pocket for the makings, not because he wanted to smoke but because it relieved his embarrassment to be doing something with his hands. Having spilled tobacco into the paper, he rolled and lit the cigarette.

"Boy, I give you best," Hughes Henry told him. "Tom flung a blue whistler into me an' one into Lawrence here, but you did his business for him right. He was one bad hombre, an' Sam Marshall was another." His arm was around his niece and it tightened as he spoke. "We sure

owe you a lot, we Henrys. I reckon I can't tell you how much. Well, let that go. But if the time ever comes when you need friends, an' need them awful bad, why don't forget we're waitin' for a call, son."

"If you want a job in the rangers——" Lawrence began.

"I don't," interrupted Jim hurriedly. "I hope I'll never use a gun again, long as I live. I'm through, onless someone pushes me."

After supper, Jim went to the corral to look after his horse. A slim shadow flitted toward him in the moonlight. His heart beat faster while he waited for Pattie to join him. With that lilting step came enchantment and romance. She was so young and slim and vivid. Joy of life sang in the movements of her light limbs. It was too good to be true. He was not worthy. He had lived with rough, hard men, and she was that mysterious unknown creature, a sweet, clean girl. None the less, she loved him, even as he did her. He knew it. Her deep eyes had flashed him that wonderful message.

They moved straight into each other's arms, without words. He forgot his shyness, his awkwardness. He told her, in the voiceless way of the universal lover, that she was the centre and circumference of his world.

And she in turn let him know how completely she had surrendered her heart into his keeping.

A thin wafer of a moon, a million stars, looked down on youth's supreme moment of happiness.

The rest is anticlimax.

Jim returned to the Bar X Y and found that Walter K. Trapper had in his absence been busy in the matter of the Sloan estate. He had unearthed witnesses, one of them the woman who had taken care of him in his mother's absence.

Proof of identity had been gathered, sufficient to satisfy any just court.

When the time of contest came, Custer Turner had disappeared. It was one thing to put up a fight when he had Black Tom Truesdale's fighting prestige behind him; it was quite another to play a lone hand against this redoubtable youngster who had back of him Trapper, Hughes Henry, and the moral support of the rangers. Wherefore the street fakir quietly slipped away, realizing that the cards were no longer stacked in his favour.

The courts decided Jim and his sister were the rightful heirs to the Sloan property.

So Jim and his young bride moved to the Sloan ranch to seek their happiness there. And there they found it. If, by some strange chance, you should drop in upon them to-day, a dark-eyed woman will graciously bid you welcome. She is still beautiful and vivid, but she is matronly. For stalwart sons and slim, tall daughters call Pattie mother. And it may be that a big, heavy-set man in dusty corduroys and broad pinched-in felt hat may canter down the road and swing from the saddle in front of the house. Anyone in a dozen counties can tell you that this is Jim Medlock—he no longer calls himself Turner—the man who wiped out the Truesdale gang years ago and brought law and order to the district. He is lord of wide acres and thousands of cattle, but, better than that, he holds the respect of everyone who knows him.

My tale is told. Therefore I write



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PELLUCIDAR  
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A PRINCESS OF MARS  
THE GODS OF MARS  
THE WARLORD OF MARS  
THUVIA, MAID OF MARS  
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A romance of California and the South Seas.

## CAPPY RICKS RETIRES

Cappy retires, but the romance of the sea and business, keep calling him back, and he comes back strong.

## THE PRIDE OF PALOMAR

When two strong men clash and the under-dog has Irish blood in his veins—there's a tale that Kyne can tell!

## KINDRED OF THE DUST

Donald McKay, son of Hector McKay, millionaire lumber king, falls in love with "Nan of the sawdust pile," a charming girl who has been ostracized by her townsmen.

## THE VALLEY OF THE GIANTS

The fight of the Cardigans, father and son, to hold the Valley of the Giants against treachery.

## CAPPY RICKS

Cappy Ricks gave Matt Peasley the acid test because he knew it was good for his soul.

## WEBSTER: MAN'S MAN

A man and a woman hailing from the "States," met up with a revolution while in Central America. Adventures and excitement came so thick and fast that their love affair had to wait for a lull in the game.

## CAPTAIN SCRAGGS

This sea yarn recounts the adventures of three rascalion seafaring men.

## THE LONG CHANCE

Harley P. Hennage is the best gambler, the best and worst man of San Pasqual and of lovely Donna.

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A tale of Aztec treasure—of American adventurers who seek it—of Zoraida, who hides it.

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The story of a strong man's struggle against savage nature and humanity, and of a beautiful girl's regeneration from a spoiled child of wealth into a courageous strong-willed woman.

## DESERT VALLEY

A college professor sets out with his daughter to find gold. They meet a rancher who loses his heart, and becomes involved in a feud.

## MAN TO MAN

How Steve won his game and the girl he loved, is a story filled with breathless situations.

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Dr. Virginia Page is forced to go with the sheriff on a night journey into the strongholds of a lawless band.

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Judith Sanford part owner of a cattle ranch realizes she is being robbed by her foreman. With the help of Bud Lee, she checkmates Trevor's scheme.

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Wayne is suspected of killing his brother after a quarrel. Financial complications, a horse-race and beautiful Wanda, make up a thrilling romance.

## THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER

A reporter sets up housekeeping close to Beatrice's Ranch much to her chagrin. There is "another man" who complicates matters.

## SIX FEET FOUR

Beatrice Waverly is robbed of \$5,000 and suspicion fastens upon Buck Thornton, but she soon realizes he is not guilty.

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No Luck Drennan, a woman hater and sharp of tongue, finds a match in Ygerne whose clever fencing wins the admiration and love of the "Lone Wolf."

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THE GIRL AT THE HALFWAY HOUSE .

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